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"HOME AGAIN! HO! HOW LOVELY IT SOUNDS! HOW LOVELY YOU ALL ARE!" SAID MIRIAM, WITH EMOTION.

A WOMAN'S TRIUMPH.

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CHAPTER I.

THE dying glories of the October sunset were beginning to fade into the dusky mist of twilight. It had been a most brilliant day, unusually warm for autumn, with a sense of rejuvenation rather than of decay in the fresh, fragrant atmosphere.

A young man walking swiftly along a narrow country lane, gave a sigh of pleasure and regret mingled, as he came to a momentary pause and looked about him at the slowly fading landscape, the sweet, clear country air blowing softly in his face the while.

"By Jove," he said to himself, as he shifted the gun he was carrying from one arm to the other, "by Jove, I declare I feel just as I used to do when I was a young'un, and it was the end of the holidays; only another week and I must turn my back on all this, and be off to town again to all my worries and struggles. Well, I ought to be deuced grateful for having had such a good spell of sunshine and fresh air to set me up for

the winter; not that I want much setting up I must say," Thorold Musgrove added with a grin, as he glanced down at his tall, stalwart young figure.

He began moving onward again. The sound of a clock chiming in the distance recalled him to the hour and made him hasten his footsteps.

"Miss Dolly will be furious if I am late again to-day. I rather like little Miss Dolly when she is furious, she does blaze out at one. I wonder if the others have got back yet? Can't think how I managed to get on to this long road; it must be a couple of miles further by this way than the other."

Walking fleetly, Thorold soon passed out of the rougher country into grounds which, though wild in their thick growth of vegetation, still had the air of belonging to private property.

The dusk here under the trees was turned into almost darkness, but the young man evidently knew his way, for he pushed on through the thicket, and in a few minutes emerged into a meadow in which a couple of colts were racing about kicking their heels friskily.

Had it not been so late Thorold Musgrove could have paused here a long time to watch

and smile at the antics of the animals, but another quarter was chimed out from the clock as he entered the meadow, and at the sound he ceased walking and broke into a run.

By this means he was very speedily landed in a wide lawn bordered by shrubs and marked out at its furthest end into tennis courts.

Beyond him only a few yards now, stretched the grey-stoned house that was his destination.

It was not a very large building, there was nothing pretentious about Crowhurst, though its garment of clinging ivy gave it a picturesque air. It was just what it purported to be, the property of a man who loved the country and all that the country gave, and the home of a prosperous squire and of his wife and children.

Thorold Musgrove gave another little sigh as he slackened his speed and approached the house, it was a sigh that came from him quite unconsciously.

"If she could have called such a place as this her home," he said to himself, with an infinity of regret and sorrow and a mist spread over his eyes for that one moment, blotting out the picture of the grey-stoned house.

It was his mother's memory that brought that

thought, his lost dead mother, that caused that sigh—that gentle, sweet suffering mother whose last days on earth had been passed in a dingy London lodging, with houses and human beings spread in their thousands about her, and her only "country" the few flowers placed by his loving hands each day in her sick-room.

Though three years and more had passed away since his mother's death, the sorrow of his loss was there just the same, the yearning tenderness lived in his heart undiminished, and every good thing that came to him now was robbed of half of its sweetness, because she who would have joyed so much in sharing it was laid for ever in her grave.

It had always been one of poor Anne Musgrove's greatest desires that her boy should have at least two months in every year out of the fatigue and bustle of London; a visit to some country house was what the mother's heart would have liked best—a visit where there would be pleasant companionship within, and sport of various sorts without. And now, when she was no longer on earth to taste this delight, Thorold, for the first time since his boyhood, found himself a guest in just such a household as his mother's love would have pictured for him.

The invitation had come quite unexpectedly, for Sir Francis Stapleton was by no means an intimate friend of young Musgrove's, business alone in fact having been the means of making them acquainted; but when the genial, kind-hearted Sir Francis suddenly invited the clever young engineer down to Crowhurst for a couple of months' visit in the early autumn, Thorold had unhesitatingly accepted the offered hospitality, feeling a keen pleasure in Sir Francis's kindness, mingled with a sorrow that his mother should not be alive to share the pleasure.

He had made a little start at first about remaining so long at Crowhurst.

"I cannot trespass on your hospitality so much, Sir Francis," he had said earnestly; "you are very good, and indeed I shall enjoy a fortnight in the country more than I can say; but—"

"Oh! I don't care about guests that stay a fortnight. Pack up your traps, my lad, and come along with me—my old lady will give you the best of welcomes, and my girls will be right glad to see you. You'll come in handy," Sir Francis had added, with a twinkle in his merry blue eye; "there's always some festivity going on among my young 'uns, and a good looking chap, you know, is never one too many. Say no more, say no more, my lad, I've taken a fancy to you—by Gad, I want to see you potting away at my birds instead of growing thin and white over those confounded plans and drawings of yours. Come along, sir, and stay your two months like a man!"

It had been impossible for Thorold to resist such a hearty offer, and the young man had had no reason to regret his submission to Sir Francis Stapleton's will. His visit to Crowhurst had been most thoroughly enjoyable, and he had not been a couple of days at the comfortable house before he found himself perfectly at home with the entire family, from the motherly Lady Stapleton (the very wife for such a man as Sir Francis) down to the little fairy like Lilias the youngest of the family, the baby and the treasure of them all.

There were always a couple or so of stray men staying in the house also, and, with Sir Francis and his three sons, a party of six guns from Crowhurst could easily be made, though more than frequently this party was swelled into nine or ten by the presence of some country neighbor and his guests.

This afternoon in fact the shooting party had been much larger than usual, and there was to be a big dinner at Crowhurst in the evening. As he crossed the broad, gravel path Thorold could see easily through the long windows into the hall beyond, and he felt relieved and pleased as he realized the other sportsmen had not preceded him, and that he was not, as he feared, the last to arrive.

Shaking off the sadness which thought of his beloved mother had brought upon him, Thorold entered the house, through the old-fashioned very wide porch-entrance, usually called the outer hall. There seemed to be an excitement prevail-

ing—a sort of tumult, going on within the second and larger hall.

Thorold found himself smiling involuntarily as the sound reached his ears. They were such a merry, healthy, happy collection of girls and boys—he seemed to have grown years younger since first he had come into their midst.

"What is it, Laxon?" he enquired lightly of the butler, a rosy-checked, white haired old man. "Have they invented a new game, or is it only another lawn-tennis tournament, indoors?"

Laxon laughed and shook his head.

"It ain't neither this time, sir; it's only Miss Miriam as has come; and there's always a fuss when Miss Miriam arrives. My! she do make the place go round, and no mistake!"

Thorold smiled again, as he knocked off some of the mud from his boots and gaiters.

"I think Miss Dolly is as lively as most people; but they are none of them, what you might call dull—eh, Laxon?"

"Lor' bless you, sir," Laxon replied heartily, "they ain't none of 'em in it with Miss Miriam! She's a regular whirlwind, that's what she is! Bless her, she's a beauty; I ain't got nothing to find fault with her; and she's got a heart as true as pure gold, that she have, sir. A deal too sweet and young she is to be boxed up along of an old woman, which—though she do be Sir Francis's sister—I ain't none too fond of, sir, and that's the honest truth! I never could see why she should a come along and took away Miss Miriam as she did. But it ain't no business o' mine!"

Thorold remembered suddenly, as he listened to these words, that he had heard a good deal, at one time or other, of this sister Miriam, who was, apparently, adopted by a maiden aunt, from whom, no doubt, there would be expectations. He had not realized very much more than this about her, save that she was evidently very dear to them all, and to none more than to her father.

Thorold had no particular favourite among the four Stapleton girls. They were all pretty, happy, wholesome young creatures, full of life and the enjoyment of life. His feelings for them were warm, but which he should have had for them had he been their brother or cousin.

He had not been more than a few days at Crowhurst, before he was on terms of the greatest friendliness with them all; they called him by his Christian name, and treated him generally as though he really belonged to them.

Thorold's heart was not prone to susceptibility where pretty girls were concerned; he never indulged in flirtations; he was too straightforward, too honest, too manly to find amusement in playing with the feelings of another being. Yet he was only too ready to respond to all sympathy and kindness, and was a great favourite with every woman.

Lady Stapleton had immediately adopted him as a boy upon whom she could lavish all a mother's care and tenderness; and with his kind-hearted hostess the young man was most affectionate, most grateful, and full of every charming thought and attention. But if such a desire as to make a conquest of handsome Thorold Musgrove had by any chance dawned in either of the girls' minds, a week's acquaintance with him would have been sufficient to disappoint them in this matter, and to show them he was not the ordinary young man to be treated in the ordinary fashion.

As a matter of fact, however, none of the Crowhurst young folk had graduated in the flirtatious school; they were, as has been said before, thoroughly happy, merry, fresh-hearted girls; and, as such they formed a sweet harmonious companionship for the young man, who was their father's guest, and who revelled in their society as only a lonely being cut off from all parents and close relations and kinsfolk could have done.

There was no other feeling in Thorold's mind, therefore, save a little curiosity and amusement mingled, when having cleansed his boots of most of the mud he walked through into the inner hall with its clamour of excited voices and merry ringing laughter.

The hall was in shadow. Miriam's arrival had evidently upset the whole household. The lamps

were not lit and the glow from the big fireplace was the only light to dispel the evening dusk.

Coming in from the dim grey twilight, however, Thorold's eyes could see clearly, and the picture he beheld as he stood for a moment unseen in the aperture of the heavy velvet curtains was one that was immediately impressed on his memory, to remain there for ever.

The group lit up by the fire glow was composed of five girls, but Thorold seemed to realize the presence of one only—of the slender graceful figure in its rough travelling coat with the cap tossed off the warm red-gold hair and the sweet face flushed and happy from the embraces of her sisters.

Each one of them was clinging to her, and little Lilias was caught up in her arms at the very moment Thorold entered.

"Oh! don't let me tell you any more about myself! Just let me realise I am at home with you all again," Miriam was crying in a voice at once rich and clear, "at home again! Oh! how lovely it sounds! how lovely you all are! I could eat you every one—eat you up every bit! Lily my little baby, Lily, say you are glad to see sister Miriam again, say—" but here she checked herself, Lilias slipped suddenly from her arms, her eyes had gone to that tall figure standing in the shadows of the curtain.

With a little cry the girl broke loose from the others.

"Father has come, father darling, it is Miriam; tell me you are glad to see me, father, kiss me!" and then there was a sudden pause, the girl had come to a sharp standstill, immediately in front of Thorold.

She had swiftly realised her mistake, and her eager loving words died away into utter silence.

"It is not father, it is only Thorold," cried Dolly Stapleton laughingly, "but father will be here directly, won't he Thorold? Come and be introduced to Miriam. You have heard so much about her you ought to know her already." Dolly added this with another little laugh; she turned to her sister, "Miriam this is Thorold Musgrove a friend of father's and not half a bad sort when you know him!" this last and mischievously.

Thorold bowed his handsome head and half stretched forth his hand, but Miriam stood apart and only returned his bow.

It was quickly evident to him, even in this, the very first moment of their meeting that this girl was altogether different from her sisters; there was a complete absence of the "amaraderie," the easy boyish sort of air which he was accustomed to receive from the others.

She spoke to him, of course, just a few conventional words of greeting, and her manner had a suggestion of hauteur, her voice a touch of coldness, very different to that eagerness, that simplicity and freshness that had rung out in those few words he had overheard as he stood and looked upon her from the shadow of the curtain.

Conscious as he was of the wide difference between Miriam Stapleton and her sisters whilst she remained to him only an indistinct vision in the mingled dusk and fire glow, this difference became tremendously marked, as Laxon and a footman remembering their duties came in hurriedly now and began lighting up the various lamps.

Thorold Musgrove found himself looking at the girl in a state of silent wonderment; a wonderment that was full of an admiration such as had never filled his mind before for any living being. For some beautiful landscape, some marvellous work of art, some exquisite picture, some magnificent piece of statuary, he had indeed felt inspired with this sentiment of eager admiration; but Miriam Stapleton was the first of all living creatures who had drawn it from him as yet.

He was so silent that he was quickly rallied by the others upon his changed demeanour.

"What is it?" enquired Barbara mischievously. "Are you not a bit surprised?" She was a nut-brown maid, with bright dark eyes and rough dark hair. "How was it possible she could be sister to this other queen-like girl?" "Have you seen a ghost, Thorold, or are you frightened of us all? Speak, speak, I pray thee!"

"He is tired—leave him alone, Bab," said Dolly, who having a decided inclination for drawing and sketching, had fallen more or less into the position of chief friend and companion to the young man. "Have some tea, Thorold; remember we don't dine till eight to night, we are quite fashionable."

Thorold took the tea and sat down in his favourite corner by the fireplace. He did not feel in the least tired, he had been walking miles during the day; yet a sense of exhilaration, a curious excitement seemed to have come in the place of fatigue, to thrill him, and yet to trouble him just a little. He remembered vaguely how he had once before felt this same sensation; it had been when he had stood on the summit of a snow-clad mountain in Wales (Switzerland had been a journey too far for so meagre a purse as he had always possessed), and his eyes and mind had taken in the grandeur, the ineffable beauty of the scene that stretched about him—a beauty that was so fraught with a sense of danger, of the unattainable. Was it a curious touch of presentiment that brought this remembrance back to Thorold Musgrove's mind now as he sat looking for the first time upon the brilliant loveliness of one who was destined to play so powerful, so intense a part in the story of his life? He was never given to much self analysis or examination. He had never had much occasion for it. Thus he could not have explained why this feeling and this memory should have returned to him now so strangely, yet so clearly. Seen in the warm toned light of the lamps, Miriam's beauty was almost bewildering. It was not only the perfection of her features, the delicate colouring of her skin, or the wonderful grace of her slender figure, it was the air of distinction, of refinement, of tone, which made her so different, so apart from her sisters. There was a family likeness existing, perhaps, though it did not strike Thorold very forcibly; but beyond this faint resemblance there was nothing to point to the fact that this dainty young creature belonged to the same stock as the four other girls, whose healthier vigorous bearing seemed to grow almost coarse and plebeian now that Miriam stood beside them.

She had quickly recovered her annoyance at having mistaken Thorold for Sir Francis. There was not a trace of awkwardness about her; clothes, manners, voice betrayed the undoubted fact that Miriam Stapleton, young as she was, had already mingled in the world, and in the world, too, of the highest social rank and position. She drew a little apart, and sat with Lillias on her knee, whilst the rest cross-questioned Thorold, desiring to know all he had done, and why and wherefore he had managed to return without the remainder of the shooting party.

"They are so late," Dolly Stapleton said glancing at the big hall clock.

"They were to go to Stonehouse Coverts to-day remember, Dolly."

Barbara hastened to say, "It is a good walk home."

Miriam turned her head, she had been softly caressing Lillias' golden hair with her lips.

"I hope father will not be very tired," she said, and the tender touch in her voice was reflected in her face. Thorold saw her in a new phase at this moment, and the thrill at his heart grew quicker as he looked at her.

"I believe there was some talk of Sir Francis driving home," he hastened to say; "at least," his eyes met Miriam's for one instant—the glory in the depths of her eyes was something he had never seen before—"at least I heard Lord Settefeld suggesting this to your father."

The eyes fixed upon him were suddenly dilated for an instant. They seemed to glow with a sort of excitement, even of triumph; then they seemed to contract, then they were turned away. Was it his fancy, or did her voice tremble a little, and had the colour pale in her cheeks as she answered him?

"Lord Settefeld!" She repeated the name twice, her tone half incredulous, half startled; then she looked across at her sister.

"Dolly, you did not tell me Lord Settefeld was coming to-night," she said, and she spoke almost sharply.

Dolly, who had gone to one of the windows to see if she could discover a sign of the returning party, looked back for an instant.

"Didn't I?" she asked, carelessly. "I did not think about it, I suppose. Your unexpected arrival, Mimi darling, sent every other thought out of my mind. Besides, I don't believe his lordship is coming back here for dinner. Mother did not tell me he was expected—he only arrived at his little shooting-box yesterday. We were all astonished to see him walk in here this morning, I can tell you; but, of course, father was delighted—Lord Settefeld is a first-rate shot, you know."

Dolly broke off here a moment, there was a pause, during which she looked intently through the window; then she gave a shout,—

"Here they are! I can just see father's dear old head! Come along, girls; come along, Mimi! What a surprise it will be for him to see you, and what a hug you will get! You will be quite squashed! Come along, Mimi! Make haste! make haste!"

But Miriam did not obey this command. She rose with the others, but, as they scampered hurriedly through the hall, she paused and stood quietly by a table. The light falling upon her showed her to be now quite pale, with a faint smile on her lips that somehow Thorold felt was not an easy expression to understand.

He made no effort to break the silence that followed, in fact he was just about to turn round and study the blazing fire instead of her bewitching loveliness, when Miriam spoke to him.

"Do you know this Lord Settefeld well, Mr. Musgrove?" she asked, and her voice was curiously hurried and a little strained.

"I met him to-day for the first time," Thorold answered her quickly, just a trifle startled; not by the question so much as by the way she put it, and by something else that he could not define.

The voices beyond were grown into a perfect babel. Miriam smiled unconsciously, and Thorold gave her back the smile.

His hand-ome bearing, the frank goodness, the honest manliness written on his face and in his eyes was revealed to the girl all at once. There was an influence of comfort, of protection, of strength, yet gentle, kindness about Thorold that made itself quickly apparent to all women.

Miriam seemed to realise this influence now as they exchanged smiles. She came a little nearer to him, moving with infinite grace.

"Then, as you have only known him so short a time, it is useless asking you if you like Lord Settefeld," she said, lightly.

She stood beside him spreading her small white hands to the fire, her eyes and lips smiling up at him faintly.

Thorold felt that queer uncertainty in his pulsation once again. A soft delicate odour of some perfume stole to him from her hair and from her draperies. He answered a little at random.—

"I never make hasty conclusions. One cannot judge well by first impressions."

"Cannot one?"

Miriam dropped her eyes from his face to her small ringless hands.

"Well, do you know, Mr. Musgrove, I don't quite agree with you. I certainly came to a very speedy impression about Lord Settefeld the first time I met him, and (with a very faint pause) I have seen no reason as yet to change from that first impression."

Thorold just glanced at her. The difference between her and all the other inhabitants of Crowhurst was little less than marvellous. Was this the girl whom the old butler had spoken of warmly as the greatest hoyden of the whole family, the ringleader of the most furious romps and practical joking?

The mere thought was impossible—the very suggestion impertinent. This was no hoyden, no boyish young woman, with muscles of iron and lungs to match. This was some dainty fairy princess, a delicate, ethereal, lovely being—a creature such as Thorold had never met before in his life's sojourn, nor had even imagined could have form or existence on earth.

He looked intently at her downcast face, at her faintly smiling lips.

"I hope," he said, in a low voice, "I hope, for Lord Settefeld's sake, Miss Stapleton, that your first impression concerning him was a good one."

Miriam laughed softly.

"I will confide in you, Mr. Thorold," she said, with the prettiest touch of familiarity in her voice and manner. "The girls have told me you are a 'real good sort.' This sounds very slangy, but it conveys a great deal. I can see for myself the girls are not very wrong. I will confide in you, therefore, and I will confess to you that the very first time I saw Lord Settefeld, I—" she paused. Her lips had a hard pale look. "I detested him," she said, going on slowly, deliberately—"detested him intensely—absolutely, and I will also confess to you that this great dislike has never disappeared, but has grown deeper and stronger and more intense each time I meet him. Are you very shocked?" she asked, her tone changing swiftly, while her face lit up suddenly with smiles.

"You have been here long enough to know we are a plain-spoken family so—"

The rest of her sentence was not uttered, for at this moment the heavy red curtains were pushed on one side, and with his face beaming with delight, Sir Francis strode in, his arms outstretched to welcome his favourite and most beautiful child, and to draw her to his heart in a tender embrace.

CHAPTER II.

THOROLD MUSGROVE was not given any immediate chance of quietly sorting out and comprehending the new and bewildering impressions which his first meeting with Miriam Stapleton had produced.

He made a hasty escape from the crowded hall, it is true; but as he was mounting the stairs to go to his own room he encountered Lady Stapleton, who greeted him affectionately, and drew him into her small boudoir, inquiring the while with some concern about his health.

"Dolly tells me she thinks you must have one of your bad headaches again. I hope, my dear, you have not walked too far, our boys are made of stouter stuff than you I think, and when the brain has to be used a great deal the body gets easily fatigued. Sit down here in my quiet corner for a little while, Thorold, my dear. You do certainly look very pale."

Thorold smilingly repudiated all thought or suggestion of being ill, but he accepted Lady Stapleton's invitation all the same—he was very fond of the half hour chats that he had with this busy, tender-hearted, motherly creature, and it was not the first time by many, that he had sat talking in the gloaming in this small room for a few minutes on his way to dress for dinner.

"Miss Dolly is very good, and so are you, dear Lady Stapleton; but I am glad to say I have no headache, and though it would be very interesting to pose as an invalid, I am afraid I am just a little too robust for that!" he laughed softly, and paused a moment. "Were you not surprised to see your other daughter, Lady Stapleton?" he asked hurriedly after that pause. Sitting here in the dusk he was once again vividly conscious of that feeling of bewildering pleasure that had swept across him as Miriam had moved close beside him, and smiling up at him, had taken him into her confidence with such a swift and unexpected abandonment of her former coldness and hauteur towards him, the pleasure he felt outweighed the feeling of surprise and conjecture which her strange utterance of hatred for the Earl of Settefeld would have surely aroused in him at other times. He listened eagerly to hear her mother speak about Miriam, to learn a little more about this brilliantly, beautiful young creature whose whole individuality was such a revelation to him.

Lady Stapleton laughed her genial laugh as he put that question.

"By this time we are none of us surprised at anything Mimi may do," she said, easily; "she loves taking us unawares, and she always appears in this sort of flying fashion—she has to come, so she says, just every now and then, to see that she is not forgotten," at this Lady Stapleton

laughed again. "It would be so very likely that anyone of them would or could forget Miriam!"

"She must be lonely perhaps living away from you all," Thorold said, pursuing the subject eagerly; "her aunt is old, is she not, and your daughter is so young, so—" he broke off, it was not easy to find words all at once to adequately describe Miriam.

"Oh! Mimi is perfectly happy with Alicia Stapleton," the mother declared warmly, "she would never content herself with our quiet, humdrum life—she has been with her aunt ever since she was quite a little child, and she has been spoilt by Miriam in every possible way. I assure you, Thorold," Lady Stapleton added with another laugh, "I should be terrified now if Mimi determined to come and make her home with us. You can see for yourself she is different to the rest of us, and indeed she lives the life of a little queen with Alicia Stapleton, such a life as she could never have here!"

There was a slight pause before the mother spoke again.

"I think," she said then, very slowly and thoughtfully—"I think, Thorold, it grows more and more difficult each day one lives to know what is really best and wisest to do for those one loves—where there is deep affection there is always ambition, and yet the world, though it gives so much—how much more it can take away—how much it can and does destroy!"

The soft musing voice dropped into silence. Thorold sat in the dusk and made no reply; he was conscious of a chilled, pained sensation as he said over and over again to himself these few words spoken by Miriam Stapleton's mother; they were so undefined, yet they conveyed so much—there was a ring of disappointment that the young man's keen sympathy quickly recognised in the mother's quiet, thoughtful voice—and with this knowledge there came once again that curious premonition of danger circling about and around this girl and her loveliness. It was a sensation that annoyed him, yet he could not shake it off. The sound of the dressing gong roused him from his thoughts, and made Lady Stapleton start out of her chair with something like a jump.

"Why bless me, I had no idea it was so late! and I have to get into my best bib and tucker to-night, too; I don't make myself very smart for you, you know, Thorold, but then you cannot compare with such a grand person as Lord Settefeld, can you?"

"You like this man? is he pleasant?"

Thorold put the two questions hurriedly as he went to open the door for his hostess.

Lady Stapleton looked up at him smilingly. The light from the corridor lit up her kindly, pleasant face, which still retained many points of its former freshness and prettiness.

"Oh! my dear," she said with a comical touch of reproach, "you ask this of me! Is it possible you do not know that Settefeld is not only an Earl—one of the first peers of the realm—but he is something like a millionaire as well! and have you forgotten that I am a mother with half a dozen marriageable daughters?"

Thorold joined in the laugh, and they separated. After that, as he was busy getting out of his shooting garments into his evening ones, Thorold's thoughts dwelt unceasingly on the beautiful girl who had come so unexpectedly in his life. He could not rid his mind of that curious jarred sensation that the mother's few words had brought so distinctly. Neither could he quite understand that strange expression of Miriam's hatred for Lord Settefeld; obviously this dislike was not shared by her mother. What could have brought such a feeling to the girl.

To himself Thorold confessed he did not quite understand what need there was for any aversion to Lord Settefeld, whom he had met this day for the first time, but whose grave, dark, handsome face had at once impressed him with a sense of latent power, of strong intellectuality, and whose manner, though not particularly cordial, certainly had been full of courtesy and some grace.

Thorold had had a short conversation with Sir Francis's most important guest during the hour for luncheon out in the covert, and he had

been a little flattered by the knowledge that Lord Settefeld was well acquainted with his work and regarded him as an authority in his profession.

He had, after this, devoted very little thought to the Earl until that moment of confidence in which Miriam had all at once recalled Settefeld's existence to his memory in so strange a way.

He could not of course fathom so great a mystery as this young girl's hatred for this man, without knowing and observing more; but if Thorold had expected any assistance or revelation to be forthcoming during the evening that followed, he was doomed to be disappointed.

Except that the evening was altogether the brightest and most amusing that had been spent at Crowhurst since his arrival there, there was nothing to mark it in any way as being extraordinary.

Miriam was the queen of the hour; her loveliness, which had seemed to Thorold so marvellous in her rough travelling gown, was enhanced a hundredfold when he caught sight of her fluttering about the big, old-fashioned drawing-room, a fairy-like creature in her exquisitely simple white dinner dress, a row of priceless pearls round her soft young throat, and her red-gold hair twisted in a big loose knot at the back of her beautiful small head.

Thorold Musgrove was emphatically not a man of the world, therefore he felt almost a sharp shock of surprise as he found himself watching Miriam as she greeted Lord Settefeld with her own peculiar grace, and sinking into a chair, began an animated and almost confidential chat about mutual friends and items of fashionable interest with the very man for whom, barely an hour before, her lovely lips had expressed the most intense and extending hatred.

Had he been a man of the world Thorold would naturally have evinced no surprise at all at this state of things, but the sphere of fashion and society, in which Miriam Stapleton already glistened and radiated as a star of unusual beauty, was an unknown, unexplored world to Thorold Musgrove, and the ways and customs and traditions of this other sphere were such as would never seem honest or right or true to a nature such as he possessed. He had not much chance of pondering over Miriam's manner to Lord Settefeld, for after dinner he found himself monopolised by her altogether. She seemed to have discovered suddenly a host of congenial topics to discuss with Thorold, and she drew him hither and thither desiring his opinion on this picture or that plant till the young man's brain seemed in a maze, and he was conscious not only of an eager delight in following her little queen-like form in its clinging white draperies, but of a swift growing desire to continue such a journey, not merely through the many rooms of her father's old house, but through vaster realms of light and beauty which her musical murmurs and his own suddenly kindled imagination spread in a vision before him. An hour—two hours—slipped away as by magic, and when Miriam abruptly declared she was tired and must go to bed, Thorold seemed as though he had been suddenly roused from some exquisite dream, such as had never dawned in his thoughts before, and whose ending seemed to thrust him suddenly into a cold and dark world. He did not know that Miriam had given vent to a prodigious and impatient yawn when she found herself alone on the staircase, having first heard with extreme satisfaction that Lord Settefeld had driven home—wards quite half-an-hour before; nor did Thorold notice the sort of wistful look that was written in Lady Stapleton's gentle eyes as she bade him good-night a little later. He was, in fact, definitely conscious of nothing—his whole being was thrilled and disturbed—the calmness of his life was broken—visions and thoughts of a strange yet exquisite form glided through his mind—he felt bewildered at himself, but his bewilderment was full of a joy that was immense, indescribable.

"You must sleep well, my dear," Lady Stapleton said to him affectionately, her tone and manner a little more tender than usual, "you will have to rise at an unearthly hour, you know, since Mimi has determined you are all to make this expedition to the Black Rocks ruins. It is a

tremendous distance—I am not surprised that Lord Settefeld has demurred about allowing his sister Lady Patricia to join the party. She is such, I imagine, a delicate young thing; he seems devoted to her—quite unusually attached for a modern brother, but he is right to take care of her. I am glad she will not undertake so much fatigue. Good-night, Thorold, good-night, my dear. I am an old woman you see, and coddling is one of my weaknesses, but I want to send you back to your work brown and strong, and all the better for your visit in the country."

Thorold answered his kind hostess in his own simple fashion—his gratitude for her goodness was so sincere. Lady Stapleton knew this, and she gave a little sigh as she watched the young man go away.

"He has a heart of gold—he is a boy in a thousand," she said to herself, and then her pleasant face clouded over. "I hope Mimi will not try to amuse herself with him—he is different to most men, he will not understand—it may hurt him—I could almost wish that she had not come just now." And then Lady Stapleton sighed again as she went her rightly round to say "good-night" to all her children. "It seems strange," she said to herself, wistfully, "that a mother should not be able to understand her own child—but Mimi has always been, and remains still, something beyond me. I must not judge her too severely, however, for though the world has made her so different to my other dear chicks, this is, perhaps, the force of circumstances, and not her fault. She is very young, and her beauty is very great. Even a mother cannot expect perfection when these two points are well remembered!"

Miriam was sitting in front of her bedroom fire, her glorious hair unbowed on her shoulders and falling in rich profusion on her pale blue dressing-gown, when her mother came in for a few good night words.

The girl was very sweet with her mother, but despite this, and though they did not converse very long, Lady Stapleton was conscious of a little touch of strangeness and restraint when she found herself in the presence of this daughter.

Miriam's possessions had metamorphosed the old-fashioned room—her maid had scattered all sorts of costly appointments about the apartment. The girl had the air of a princess as she sat lounging in front of the fire. The mother felt no kinship with this beautiful young creature, so utterly unlike all the other members of her little world.

Lady Stapleton said no words about Thorold. She was a wise woman; astonishingly tactful when it is remembered the whole of her life had been spent in the quiet uneventful groove of the country, where diplomacy has little opportunity of flourishing. She only conversed about Mimi's own affairs, asked a few questions about the aunt the girl had just left, and, finally, with a tender kiss, went away.

Miriam Stapleton gave a sharp impatient sigh that was yet a sigh of relief as she found herself alone.

"Oh! the ennui of this night!" she said to herself as she flung herself once again into the chair. "I am quite exhausted!" She rested her beautiful head against the cushions, and, slowly, a flush mounted to her face. "But it has been a success!" she murmured, her whole face expressing satisfaction. "He cannot be mistaken any longer; and, though he tried to hide it, I saw his face light up as he came in and found me here. It all went well—this other man was just what I needed; but what a heavy creature! Good, of course—that is written in every line of his face—and, being good, useful. I must keep him in tow; he might be an invaluable ally if ever I need a real friend." She stooped forward here, and rested her chin in her hand, her beautiful hair falling about her face in an eerie and picturesque fashion. "It is so dangerous," she said to herself, in a dogged sort of way; "as I advance I see the danger more and more and more. Yet, I shall do it, for though it is so dangerous, it is not impossible, and the risk is worth so much—the chance is so very wonderful. It is all that I have desired, all I have hoped for. He loves me with all the power and strength for which his

family have been famous. He will make me his wife—he will make me a queen—the Countess of Settefeld will be one of the first where all are great! And must I renounce this? must I throw it away!—must I turn my back on my proudest ambition and all because—ah! how I hate myself; how I could kill myself when I remember it all!”

The lovely young face was transformed altogether. In this moment it had no longer the delicate ethereal beauty, at the first glimpse of which Thorold Musgrove's heart had become changed and troubled. It wore a hard, fierce look; the soft eyes blazed, the smiling lips were contracted, and the little fingers of the hand which supported the chin were pressed harshly into the pure white skin, leaving deep red marks. So it looked for the space of several long minutes, then gradually the anger, the fierceness, faded away, a sort of recklessness or defiance came in its stead; flinging out her little hands with a gesture of unutterable grace and abandon, Miriam Stapleton rose to her feet.

“If I think all night, I shall only come round to where I was before. I will not think—I must not—it only unsettles me; I will act instead! To-morrow Danvers, Earl of Settefeld, will ask me to be his wife for the second time; this time he shall not ask in vain!”

CHAPTER III.

THE picnic-party left Crowhurst at a very early hour. It was a brilliant and lovely morning as they all assembled in the big hall; and there was much laughter and merriment as each person came hurrying from their room to join the rest below.

Lady Stapleton and Lilia had been the only two who had not been counted in among the party to Black Rock ruins on the evening before, but when everyone was about to leave the breakfast-table and climb up into the waggonettes and dog-carts that were waiting to carry them to their destination, it was discovered that Dolly was not yet come downstairs, and it fell to Barbara's lot to explain that this particular sister had such a bad headache, she could not possibly join the expedition.

There was much surprise and real regret expressed at this intelligence, and no one was more genuinely sorry than Thorold Musgrove, who had developed a sincere friendship for Dorothy Stapleton, more especially since he had discovered she had a small talent for drawing, and was more than content to be his pupil.

Sir Francis was greatly perplexed.

“Dolly with a headache? well, that is something fresh, mother, isn't it?” he exclaimed, as he bustled about superintending the loading of the big waggonettes with his girls and the hampers containing luncheon. “I don't remember hearing of such a thing before!”

Lady Stapleton, who had presided at the breakfast-table, seeing that everyone had a good meal before starting on their long drive, replied to her husband's remark quickly though very quietly,—

“Dolly was busy painting the old summer-house yesterday; I told her at the time she would probably suffer from the smell of the green paint, but she would do it, and this is the consequence. A headache is certainly an unusual occurrence in our establishment,” the mother added with a faint smile, as she met Thorold's sympathising eyes; “but it is not by any means a novelty.”

Miriam, who had come down, looking absolutely divine in a gown of russet-coloured velvet with some costly furs about her throat, and a toque of velvet on her beautiful hair, expressed gentle concern for her sister's ailment.

“I have a bottle of the most wonderful salts!” she declared, as she let Thorold wait upon her like a slave. “I will take them to Dolly; one sniff of my bottle, and she will have no more headache, I am quite sure.”

Miriam half rose as she spoke, but Lady Stapleton's voice checked her.

The mother's eyes met her daughter's beautiful ones very straight and full in this moment.

“It is very good of you, Mimi,” Lady Stapleton

said quietly, “but I would rather you did not disturb Dolly. The child will be much better left to herself.”

Miriam gave a little shrug of her graceful shoulders, it was barely perceptible, and Thorold did not notice it; all he saw was the wistful, almost pained expression in the girl's exquisite face as she just glanced at him, and for the first time since he had met her, Thorold was conscious of an irritated feeling against Lady Stapleton. Not having the clue to the mother's real thoughts and feelings, he misunderstood her words and her manner towards Miriam, and judged her a little too quickly.

“Well,” Sir Francis said, coming up at this moment, “it's a deuced pity about little Dolly; she's just the very one for a thing of this sort as a rule; but, no doubt you are right, mother dear, the kindest thing will be to leave her alone. And now, girls and boys, when you are ready, say the word. Mimi, my darling, you are going to sit by me, of course!”

Miriam caressed her father's strong hand and kissed it softly with her small red lips.

“No dad, darling, I am not. Carrie is going to sit by you. I know she would like it, and I have promised Mr. Thorold,” with a dreamy glance from her speaking eyes at the young man, “that he shall drive me in the small dog-cart, I am sure he is a splendid whip!”

Thorold stood by bewildered, yet thrilling with sudden delight. This promise, of which Miriam spoke so glibly, was something quite new to him. He had been wondering with an eagerness and a nervous sense of coming disappointment where she would be placed, and if he would find himself anywhere near her, and now this little suspense was ended, and ended in a way that was full of sudden and intoxicating delight to him.

Thorold never knew how wistfully, almost sadly, Lady Stapleton's kindly eyes dwelt upon him in this moment. He did not chance to glance in her direction; had he done so he must have been surprised and touched by the expression written on the sweet motherly face.

Miriam saw it, however, and had infinite pleasure in so doing. Now, if she had planned no former intention of going with Thorold in the dog-cart she would certainly have decided on making this arrangement in order to give her mother a little vexation.

It was an old story now—this little warfare—that had been fought between Miriam's strong, selfish, cruel will, and her mother's good true nature each time they had come in contact.

From everyone within her old home the girl demanded and received full devotion, allegiance, and admiration. The other girls recognised her superiority and sovereignty without an instant's hesitation. For Miriam, and for Miriam alone, her father would renounce immediately a day's shooting to minister to her pleasure. The servants worshipped her, the tenantry gave her a sort of awed adoration such as they would offer to a young queen. Not a single creature on the whole estate, and indeed, with a very few exceptions, throughout their vast circle of acquaintances and friends, but succumbed absolutely to her fascination, and conceded to her will, save and only the mother who bore her—the mother, who, to her own sorrow, knew Miriam's character and nature at something like their true worth, and whose heart sorrowed over the knowledge, and yearned each time they met to find a new and a better spirit encained in her child's most lovely body.

The effect of feeling that her mother did not share in the blind adoration given to her by the rest of the world was sufficient to rouse all the latent hardness and cruelty in Miriam's nature; and now, so soon as she caught sight of that wistful expression on Lady Stapleton's face, as her eyes rested upon Thorold Musgrove, the girl took a deeper and more determined resolution to win to herself and for herself alone the whole heart of this young man whom she would never care for, nor permit to enter into her real life in any sense of the word, and who must eventually taste the deepest and worst sort of suffering when the freak of annoying her mother had passed from Miriam's

mind, and she had tossed Thorold on one side as lightly and carelessly as a toy that had ceased to amuse or even to interest her.

The idea that had flashed through her thoughts as she had sat communing with herself by her bedroom fireside the night before, the sort of reliance and certainty upon the future friendship and probable aid of such a man as Thorold that had come to her then, had been the reason for Miriam's graciousness and dangerous sweetness to the young fellow; possibly had she not gathered from her mother's manner that Thorold was more than passing dear to the inmates of Crowhurst; if she had not instantly jumped to the conclusion that her sister Dorothy had unhappily for herself set her affections on this tall handsome young engineer with his honest lips and eyes and his unconsciously sweet and earnest manner, it may be that Miriam would have relinquished her intention of capturing Thorold's love only to fling it back to him by-and-bye with all the contemptuous cruelty and coldness of which she was capable.

Now however, all thought of this was at an end, for she had a double reason for subjugating him.

She had sought his company so closely the night before because she had known that the sight of her lovely self fitting about the big drawing-rooms and conservatories with this man had been little less than torture to the other man whose wife she had desired and intended to be ever since she had met him little less than a year ago.

That Lord Settefeld should suffer some considerable pain and uncertainty before receiving her final answer, was something Miriam had sworn to carry out so soon as it became evident to her that her power over him was supreme and that Lord Settefeld could not resist her, despite all the desires of those who cared for him, neither had he the strength to fling off the insinuous and intoxicating influence that her beauty had brought into his life and thoughts.

Miriam Stapleton had had one very bad moment in connection with Lord Settefeld and her ambition to become his wife.

When first they had met, when first his dark sombre sad eyes had looked on her exquisite loveliness all had seemed smooth and fair; the girl's worldly heart had beat with a fast thrill of satisfaction and of surety.

All of a sudden, however, there had come a change. Lord Settefeld from being a constant visitor at Miss Alicia Stapleton's charming little house dropped into a mere acquaintance; the flowers he had sent so frequently ceased to appear altogether.

Miriam's hopes were blighted in the bitterest fashion; she had suffered the most intense disappointment and mortification, all the more so since she was quick to see how shrewdly the world smiled at this, to her unexpected termination of what had seemed a wonderful matrimonial arrangement.

As can be imagined, Miriam's was not the nature to accept such a defeat easily nor unquestioned. She had not to seek very far to arrive at the cause for this change in Lord Settefeld's manner towards her.

Although he had become such an intimate friend with her aunt and herself, the acquaintance between themselves and the remainder of his family had never made satisfactory progress.

The Earl's mother and sister had, it is true, called once upon the two Misses Stapleton, but the visit had been a short and an unsatisfactory one.

Lady Patricia De Burgh, the young and only sister of Lord Settefeld was one of the very few people who was not swayed or even touched by Miriam Stapleton's marvellous fascination; she was quite young, barely nineteen, but she possessed an unusual character for a girl of her age.

She was very quiet and thoughtful, sharing in almost a remarkable degree, her brother's high mental qualities, and holding a place in his heart and respect which no other human being had ever approached as yet.

His mother was quite the opposite of Patricia, she was a charming woman, very handsome, very worldly and inordinately proud. Her objection

to Miriam Stapleton as her son's future wife was based on a different theory to Lady Patricia's.

The Countess of Settefeld was a scion of one of the grandest ducal families in England, and Miriam Stapleton, though undoubtedly a lady and the daughter of a gentleman, was nevertheless, merely a commoner in Lady Settefeld's eyes, and as such not equal or desirable as a wife to so proud and splendidly endowed a man as Danvers eleventh Earl of Settefeld.

Lady Patricia shared her mother's pride in her birth and race, but she was devoid of arrogance or excessive worldliness. The immediate sensation of distrust and dislike that came to her so soon as she made the acquaintance of the girl, about whose loveliness all the fashionable world was raving, and whose fascination had already worked a marked change in her most beloved brother, was so spontaneous, so real, that it could not be shaken off, and it had been the eloquence of his sister's silence in speaking of Miriam, that first showed Settefeld the danger into which he had so nearly drifted, and roused a sense of caution and prudence within him.

His admiration for Miriam's beauty, however, remained very great during this period of withdrawal, and she found her one and only consolation in knowing this, and in playing a most difficult part to perfection. Whenever they met the man was unfaithfully touched by the softness, the sadness, the resignation as it were, conveyed in Miriam's manner.

He was not a man to love lightly, and gradually the passion within him grew stronger and stronger, till every other wish or feeling was merged in the determination to win Miriam Stapleton for his wife, to be mistress of his proud position, his own adored love.

Two days before Miriam had paid this sudden visit to her old home Settefeld had brought matters to a crisis. He had been following her aunt and herself from place to place, during their continental sojourn, tracking them back to their little home in town eventually, where he lost no time in proclaiming his intentions, and demanding Miriam's hand in marriage. To his intense chagrin and real pain he was refused, quietly, sorrowfully, but decidedly.

"I will marry no man whose family hold themselves aloof from me. I am as proud as your sister or your mother, Lord Settefeld," Miriam had said to him very quietly, but with much dignity; "although my dear father is only a simple gentleman, I hold myself no less than they. Please be assured it costs me a great deal to say this to you—for," with a hesitation which conveyed a touch of heaven to him, even in his intense disappointment, "for I like you very much; but—I have no other course to pursue under the circumstances."

"Do you then put your pride before my love, Miriam," Settefeld had asked, passionately, eagerly, and she, looking him full in the face, her glorious eyes gleaming with sudden fire, had answered him in one word, "Yes;" and had answered him, and had given him at once intense satisfaction and renewed hope. For in this evidence of her pride, he saw, or imagined he did, a possibility of uniting his mother and his love, and so smoothing out a path that had seemed full of difficulty.

"I cannot accept your decision as final and irrevocable," he had said; and then after carrying her little hand to his lips he had left her, and Miriam's heart had burned with triumph, and her eyes had gleamed like stars.

She had no intention of letting him accept her decision as final, and when he had gone she set herself to work to conduct her plans.

She easily discovered that her suitor had gone down to Westshire to the shooting box he owned down there, a little place quite close to her father's house, and all at once Miriam discovered that it was quite a century since she had paid a visit to Crowhurst and her family, and that she positively could not live through another day until this duty had been done.

It was a little blow to her to learn indirectly through her mother that Lady Patricia was staying at The Wolds also; but Miriam felt so sure of her victory now, that she could afford to snap her fingers, figuratively, at Patricia de

Burgh and her influence, whilst she promised herself much satisfaction and pleasure in punishing Lady Patricia in the future for the quiet yet undoubted dislike and disapproval Lord Settefeld's sister entertained for her.

A flirtation with Thorold Musgrove was not only amusing to Miriam in a sense (for the various reasons already given), but was of the greatest value now in putting the finishing touches to the passion that filled Danvers, Lord Settefeld, in every pulse of his body, in driving away every other thought or determination save that of making her his wife.

As Thorold sat in the dog-cart, whirling through the country lanes, the reins in his hand, Miriam close beside him, the joyousness of her laughter ringing in his ears, the subtle sweetness of her perfumed hair stealing to him in the freshness of the morning, the whole witchery of her dainty, lovely person creeping like poison into his inmost heart, into his clear, practical mind, it seemed to him as if the meaning of life, and happiness had never even dawned for him before; as though the world which had always been so beautiful to him were now full of transcendent loveliness; as if a very kingdom of joy, of ecstasy unspeakable were spread open before him.

How instantly would he have raised his strong, right arm with a passion of hot indignation and sealed the lips with a fierce blow, could anyone have stood beside him at this moment and told him the truth of the present and the future!

What anger would have been powerful enough to let him express fully his sense of horror at so cruel a libel! so horrible a lie—this lie that told him that the joy of this moment would be turned to the bitterness of betrayed love, the anguish of a broken heart, and that the day was to come not far ahead, when he would curse with cold lips the very sound of Miriam's name, and the memory of the moment when first she had come into his simple, honest, hard-working life!

(To be continued.)

THE RECTOR.

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CHAPTER V.

The storm prophesied by Chudleigh had come, rattling through the avenue of chestnuts as if it meant to strip the trees of their very branches, and sweeping across the moor, and amidst the belt of trees round the deserted Rectory, till they bent beneath the bitter blast and moaned like living creatures writhing beneath a scourge.

It would have seemed impossible for a human being to stand against the furious drenching of the icy sleet, yet the dark figure of a man, closely wrapped in a black cloak of foreign make and shape, bent its head against the downpour, and, literally fought its way across the moor in the direction of the wood.

For an hour the struggle lasted, the wayfarer progressing slowly but surely towards the friendly haven of the dark oaks looming in the distance; and not resting a moment till he had reached the rickety gate—which had been torn from its rusted hinges, and lay a perfect wreck upon the ground—and stood panting, but triumphant, beneath the leafless branches of a huge old oak. Then he leaned against the tree, and, folding his arms, looked moodily round upon what little he could see of the desolation around.

"A wreck!" he muttered, moodily. "A wreck! Heaven forsaken and man forsaken! Ah, old trees! what have you and I suffered since last you looked down upon me! The old house must be almost within sight. Strange that my heart leaps at the thought of seeing it! I fancied there was scarce enough blood left in me to leap at anything! But the old house!—the old house!"

Then, shaking himself till the wet flew from his coat in a shower of glistening drops, he emerged from the shelter of the tree and strode up the path which led to the front of the desolate mansion.

Then, looking up at its windows, his face grew white, and his hands, clenched under his cloak across his heart, vainly tried to keep down the storm which threatened to burst forth.

For a moment he stood motionless as a statue, then drawing a deep breath of pain he groaned between his clenched teeth.

"Behold, your house is left unto you desolate."

And, muttering this twice, thrice, a score of times, he stood, exposed to the pitiless sleet, and the fury of the wind, gazing at the ruined house as if he were indeed the senseless stone he resembled.

When the storm commenced Maud was in the drawing-room at the piano. Touching the keys restlessly, she commenced Gounod's "Ave Maria," but at the first bar she succeeded in forgetting the storm, and, half closing her eyes, lost herself in the subtle wailing of the music. As she played, the man who, but a little time since stood gazing at the deserted Rectory, paused bare-headed, outside the window, his face sunk upon his breast and his hands clasped.

With the last note throbbing, dying through the air, Maud rose, and, the glamour of the music still over her, seated herself in a low chair by the fire and there, lulled by the storm and the dead red of the coals, she fell asleep, her beautiful face lit up with the smile that only the pure and childlike at heart can wear.

How long she slept she knew not, but a slight noise awoke her, and looking up with a start she saw the dark figure standing in the room looking at her.

With a low cry of alarm she rose from her chair, and pressing one hand against her heart held out the other as in supplicating terror.

The stranger lifted his head with a grave smile which reassured her even before a voice, whose gentleness charmed all her fear away, said,—

"Madam, don't be alarmed; I am not so terrible as you may think. Forgive my intrusion; I was looking for Sir Fielding Chichester. The night is dark and the storm confusing, and I missed the path; or, rather, your music drew me from it. By some chance a side door had been blown open by the wind; I entered—wrongly I admit—and, meeting no one, found my way here."

Pouring out this strange confession in a voice almost tremulous in its musical softness, with a slightly foreign accent that lent it an additional charm, he bent low before her.

"I—I am not frightened," said Maud, her gaze rivetted on the face and form. "I will call my father. Will you not sit down?" and, still unable to remove her eyes from him, she walked towards the door.

With a gesture he declined, and crossing to the fire, leant one arm upon the carved mantel, the freight making a ruddy background to his stalwart form, as looking towards the door he waited.

In a few minutes it opened, and Sir Fielding entered, and advancing towards the stranger said, in his mild, dreamy voice,—

"You wish to see me?"

The stranger fixed his dark eyes upon the pale smooth face for a moment, seemingly absorbed in contemplation, then, waking as it were with a start, replied, in a voice from which all the tenderness had gone, leaving a stern, cold music behind,—

"Do you wish to see me, Sir Fielding Chichester?"

The old man started with an exclamation, then, going close up to the speaker and scanning his features anxiously, exclaimed as his face lit up with the light of recognition,—

"Maurice Durant!"

"Yes, Maurice Durant. You are surprised, Sir Fielding, yet not so much as I; for a week since I had as little thought of seeing your Chichester Hall as Heaven."

"Thank Heaven!—thank Heaven!" exclaimed Sir Fielding, grasping the outstretched hand, and wringing it with his feeble one. "Oh, Maurice, Maurice! we all thought you were dead."

"Heaven has not proved so kind," muttered Maurice Durant.

"We never expected to see you again."

And you have come back to us as suddenly as—

"Why do you hesitate?" said Maurice, frowning. "Yes. A week ago I was sleeping in a peasant's hut beside an Alpine ravine. I dreamt of England, dreamt so vividly that when I awoke the vision had left a longing for the reality. I struggled against it, but—bah!—when a man fights himself what chance has he of victory? I decided to come—I came—I am here."

He strode up to the fire, extending his hands towards the blaze.

"Dear me—dear me," said Sir Fielding, thoroughly bewildered by the deep voice, the strange gesture and the foreign accent, as much as by the singular manner of the man. "I heard no carriage drive up."

Maurice faced round.

"Nor do I see how you could, considering that I walked."

"Walked! Heaven bless me!" said the baronet, "then," catching at the cloak, "you must be wringing wet. My dear sir, this is enough to give you your death! You must change your clothes immediately. I will tell them to see that my own room is got ready for you; meanwhile if you will accept my son Chudleigh's, in which you will find a fire—"

Maurice Durant held up his hand with a gesture almost of impatience.

"Sir Fielding, I shall be gone in five minutes. Cease, I beg of you, for it pains me to give you a refusal. A whim seized me to take one look at the Hall. I fought my way here through the storm, and, standing outside this window, was drawn hither by your daughter's music. Why should I stay? I have seen you, and there is nothing left for me but to return," and he held out his hand.

Sir Fielding stared at the stern, weather-tanned face with its deep wrinkles and great, piercing eyes in astonishment.

"Impossible!" he exclaimed. "You cannot brave such a night as this again, it would be an insult to me! At least," he added, hastily, as Maurice Durant shook his head, "at least you will stay and eat something!"

Still Maurice held out his hand, and Sir Fielding grew despairing as he saw the heavy forehead darken impatiently.

"Well, if you will neither rest nor eat, at least you will wait and see Chudleigh!" he cried.

"I think not," was the reply. "I shall get another opportunity soon perhaps. At this moment I am anxious to be on my road again."

"Where are you going—where will you sleep?" asked Sir Fielding, in utter bewilderment, and feeling powerless before the stern will which proclaimed itself in such gravely musical tones. "The village is a long way; there is no inn on the road, not a single place that will open its doors to you to-night—"

"Save one," said Maurice Durant, in a significant tone.

"Which?" said Sir Fielding.

"The Rectory," replied the other. "I shall sleep in my own house to-night."

Sir Fielding shuddered.

"No, no!" he breathed, "you shall stay here," and going to the door he called out,—

"Chudleigh!"

Chudleigh came down the stairs with a promptitude quickened by curiosity, for he had never heard his father's voice raised so loudly before.

"Chud," commenced Sir Fielding, with agitation, but before he could get farther the traveller stepped forward and, laying his strong hand on the baronet's trembling arm, said, in a deep grave voice, quickened by the rich foreign accent,—

"Chudleigh Chichester, your father would keep me prisoner in his castle and I am forcing my way out; you are a friend to freedom and will sympathize. Sir Fielding, it is not right to break one's oath. I have vowed to sleep beneath no roof in England before my own. Good night!" and before either Sir Fielding or his son could recover from the commanding charm of his manner, the door had swung to behind him, letting in a blast of icy wind and a shower of sleet.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Sir Fielding; "how changed. I seem to be dreaming! Maurice Durant! Maurice Durant!"

"Maurice Durant," breathed a low voice at his side as Maud's trembling fingers clasped his arm. "Papa—he might have been a king!"

CHAPTER VI.

It was Sunday morning. The little church in the dale was slowly filling, the simple villagers strolling up the clean-kept gravel path in complete families, and clustering round the porch in conversational groups.

Five minutes to eleven and there came the rattle of a carriage—Sir Fielding's, followed by Lady Mildred's—Sir Fielding in his dark, old-fashioned coat and frill, looking every inch a Chichester, and Chudleigh with Maud on his arm, looking as handsome as even the good people of Grassmere, who were used to good looks in their lord's family, could desire.

Carlotta, who accompanied Lady Mildred, excited much unobtrusive curiosity, dressed in her deep mourning, edged with sable and set off by her queenly form, and received as reverent a recognition as Lady Mildred, who, next to Maud, was perhaps the favourite.

At the porch Maud stopped for a moment to inquire after one of the labourers' wives who had been ill, and Chudleigh, seizing the opportunity, approached Lady Mildred.

"Well, Chud, we thought you had lost your way the other night, or got drowned, as you had not come to see us. I don't think Sir Fielding would have been guilty of such unpardonable neglect."

And she shook her head reproachfully. Chudleigh glanced at Carlotta.

"Had I known that you were so anxious to see me, my dear aunt, I should have ridden or walked over without fail. Have you got settled yet? Do you feel at home?" he said to Carlotta.

"Quite," she said; "one could not be otherwise, the house is so beautiful and Lady Mildred is so kind."

"I am glad you like The Cottage," he said, eagerly. "Did you hear the storm on Friday?"

"Hear it?" she said, with great surprise. "It was terrible. We thought the house would have been swept away. The old Rectory must have suffered most, I should think. I felt a positive relief at seeing it still towering above the old trees."

"Ah, the Rectory," said Chud. "By the way, I have quite a piece of romance for you. You remember the history I told you the other morn—"

"Come, Chud," said Sir Fielding. "It is time to get to our pew."

So Chudleigh had to keep the story of Maurice Durant's return to tell at some future time.

The prayers were finished, the Litany droned through, and the Ten Commandments drearily recited, and Sir Fielding was serenely preparing to wake up for the hymn which the choir had been practising the whole of the week, preparatory to settling himself again for the sermon, when a half-inaudible buzz from the congregation drew his attention to the fact that the little curate had taken his seat in one of the altar chairs as if he had quite finished his part of the service and was prepared to rest.

Before Sir Fielding had recovered from his astonishment at the unusual proceeding on the part of the curate the vestry door was heard to close, and the next instant a figure of commanding height and bearing, attired in an old black-brown robe of time-worn silk, strode across the chancel and entered the pulpit.

The whole congregation was petrified and too astonished to do aught but stare at the grand head bent over the cushion in the introductory prayer, which rang out in a deep, grave voice, as unlike in its full, rich music the good little curate's piping as the strains of a cathedral organ are to the squeakings of a church mouse.

Then when the head was raised the villagers and gentlefolks drew a deep breath, and, fixing their eyes upon the calm, set face, waited for the

text, all excepting those who remembered Gerald Durant and his son, wondering who it was that had come down upon them with the air of a Roman emperor and the face of a king.

Sir Fielding drew himself up and gazed round with a look of bewilderment, and turning to Maud, who was still kneeling, her sweet face turned up towards the pulpit with an expression of wondering awe almost piteous, whispered,—

"Maurice Durant!"

She did not seem to hear him, but slowly rising from her knees at the text "All is vanity and vexation of spirit" rolled through the church, and clinging to Sir Fielding's arm, listened to the sermon with her eyes fixed in an expression half of terror, half of awe and worship upon the preacher's face.

What a sermon it was! Commencing in slow, measured tones, the man who had fought his way through storm and wind sufficient to appal the stoutest heart explained the short, curt line "All is vanity," explained it with unflinching severity—a severity and harshness that were terrible in their depth and eloquence, and then, warming with his subject, poured forth upon the heads of the spell-bound congregation a declamation and a denunciation so terrible in its merciless sternness, so bitter in its despair, so touching in its hopeless remorse, that when he had finished every soul drew a breath of relief and shuddered as they waited for the Benediction. But they waited in vain, for with the same gesture he had used in throwing his cloak round him Maurice Durant turned, and with the same firm, commanding step, looking neither to the right nor the left, descended the pulpit stairs, crossed the chancel and was lost to sight.

Amidst a deathlike silence the little curate, white and frightened, approached the altar rails and in faltering accents delivered the Benediction, which Maurice Durant had either forgotten or purposely omitted.

Then the congregation hurried out to crowd the porch and path with eager and curious groups, inquiring who the strange clergyman was, to find their curiosity farther heightened by hearing those whose memories stretched back twelve years, declare that the man who had thrilled them to the heart so wondrously was none other than the long-lost Maurice Durant.

Sir Fielding, with a hurried request, that Chudleigh would take charge of the ladies and a reminder that Lady Mildred and Carlotta were to dine at the Hall, hastened to the vestry in time to see the curate, still agitated and frightened, remove his surplice aided by the old clerk, the only other person in the vestry.

"Where is Mr. Durant?" asked Sir Fielding.

"I don't know, sir," replied little Mr. Hawes, piteously. "He was not here when I came in. Dear me, sir, I am so startled I can scarcely compose myself. Did you ever hear such a sermon—"

"When did you know Mr. Durant was going to preach?" inquired Sir Fielding, cutting short his bleating.

"Only this morning, sir," was the reply. "I was just putting on my surplice when the door opened, and, thinking it was Mr. Price here, sir, I didn't turn round until I heard a voice—such a voice too!—say: 'Are you the curate?' I turned round pale and startled, I must confess, and said that I was. 'I am Maurice Durant, your rector,' said he. 'I wish to preach here this morning. Have you the key to that cupboard?' and he pointed to the old press where the robes are kept. I told him I had not, and was going to ask him for some proof of his identity, some farther explanation, but before I could speak he walked to the cupboard and with a turn of his hand wrenched it open. Then, taking the old silk gown you saw him wear, he said, 'The bell has ceased—go!' and, too confused, Sir Fielding, to offer any resistance, I went. Oh, dear, I sincerely hope there is nothing wrong; if so it is sure to come to the bishop's ears."

"There is nothing wrong, Mr. Hawes," said Sir Fielding. "It is Maurice Durant who preached this morning. Make your mind easy and remember that however strange his manner, he is your rector," and without waiting for the curate's

expression of thankfulness he turned back to the carriages which were waiting for him, passing several groups of cottagers who were eagerly discussing the mysterious event.

Entering the Hall carriage, which contained the ladies only—Chudleigh had decided to walk. Sir Fielding, in answer to the shower of questions poured upon him by Lady Mildred, gave her an exact description of the scene at the Hall on the night of Maurice's return.

"And he faced the storm there that night," said Carlotta, with quiet astonishment. "It seemed to me sufficient to sweep a human being from the earth."

"It was terrible," murmured Maud, shuddering and nestling against her companion. "Think, Carlotta! he fought his way to the Rectory and slept there, in that deserted, ghostly place where his father fell dead!" and she shuddered, uttering a low sob that alarmed her beautiful companion.

"Hush, hush, Maud!" she said. "He has terrified you."

"No, no," exclaimed Maud, eagerly. "He does not frighten me. I feel for him, I—oh, Carlotta, think of his face, it is so kingly, so sorrowful, so sad; I am sure he has suffered terribly, and I pity him so," and she laid her face amongst the furs on Carlotta's breast.

"Poor Maud," exclaimed Sir Fielding. "It was quite upset her. He went to the drawing-room where she was playing alone and appeared before her with the rain streaming from his large cloak, and his hair blown about his head like a figure from a Raphael cartoon. He startled me so that I am not surprised at Maud being unnerved."

"Of course not. I confess that I never felt so terrified in my life as I did this morning. It was quite terrible," said Lady Mildred. "I never heard such fearful eloquence."

"One could only learn in suffering such a wonderful knowledge of human passion as he displayed," said Carlotta, in a low voice.

"You are right, my dear Miss Lawley, you are right," said Sir Fielding. "Heaven knows what Maurice Durant has gone through during his wanderings."

"If his history is half as mysterious as his appearance would lead one to imagine it," said Lady Mildred, "it is a sad one, Fielding."

"Ay, ay," echoed Sir Fielding, sighing, "Is he at the Rectory still, Sir Fielding?" asked Carlotta, as the carriage drew up at the Hall.

"Yes, I believe so," said he. "I sent Wilson over this morning with an invitation to dine here. I put it in the most supplicating language I could, but I do not know—ah, here is Wilson," he broke off as his valet approached the carriage. "Well, Wilson, have you been to the Rectory?" he asked.

"Yes, Sir Fielding," replied the man.

"And did you find Mr. Durant?"

"Yes, sir; I knocked several times, and, receiving no answer, was going away, but as soon as I got down the steps I saw a tall gentleman sitting on one of the broken terraces, smoking a foreign-looking pipe, and watching me quite cool and unconcerned. 'Why are you knocking?' he said. I said, 'I had a letter for Mr. Durant.' He held out his hand without a word, and after reading the letter said, as he walked toward the house, 'Tell your master, sirrah, that I beg to be excused.'"

CHAPTER VII.

THE "Folly" was new, so was every thing in it from the lord and master thereof to the gloomy dinner service—carved, stamped, and engraved with the Gregson crest wherever there was room to put it—and the glittering armour ranged down the hall, worn by Mr. Gregson's ancestors, who existed in any age Mr. Gregson's imagination might select.

Mr. Gregson's manners were new too, and striking. A little, short, thick-set man, with a red face, rough head of hair, and stubbly iron grey whiskers, large, lobster-tuined hands, which he had a habit of banging on tables or chairs in support

of an argument or to emphasize a command, he looked from head to foot that most obnoxious of individuals—a self-made man, who never can forget his manufacturer.

Of Mrs. Gregson little need be said. She was a worthy woman, who really merited better things than a life made miserable by being placed in a false position.

The son, Tom Gregson, bore a strong resemblance to his father, though his manners were slightly better. Tom Gregson was particular about his clothes, took an interest in race meetings and handicaps, and never omitted to back his opinion, however trivial the subject upon which he offered it; indeed, nearly all his sentences commenced or ended with "I bet you two to one," or "I'll take six to four," and like phrases, which shocked his would-be refined sisters, and made his father use bad language.

Of the girls it would be scarcely fair to speak too critically. They were as well-mannered and unaffected as could be expected of them in such bad-mannered and affected surroundings, were tolerably good-looking, rather showy than beautiful, and extremely desirous of entering the charmed circle of the county aristocracy, and especially of the Hall, which stood at its head.

Occasionally Tom Gregson made the acquaintance of some smaller stars of the fashionable hemisphere, and obeying his father's order, would invite them to the Folly, but they seldom accepted, for there was no shooting, and very little fishing to be had on the Folly grounds, and, as for the hunting, the Grassmere pack was not celebrated enough to tempt a hunting man of these hard-riding, long-run days.

Sometimes, however, Tom succeeded in hooking a fish, and this Christmas was one of them, for a certain Honourable Clarence Hartfield, having nothing else to do, had accepted Tom's invitation, and was rather enjoying in a quiet way the persistent toadyism of Papa Gregson and the outspoken idolatry of Lavinia and Bella.

Coming home from church with the strange sermon ringing in their ears, the Misses Gregson had, of course, burst into a torrent of chatter, in which, as usual, the Honourable Clarence Hartfield did not join, being averse to hard talking as well as all other hard work, and preferring to lie back amongst the soft cushions and listen with half-closed eyes. Besides which Mr. Hartfield had another reason for silence. He was thinking—and that was a great undertaking for one of Clarence Hartfield's class—thinking not of the strange sermon or the preacher, but of a certain lovely face he had seen in the little church, and wondering where he had seen it before.

At dinner the young ladies introduced the very subject of his thoughts.

"Mamma, did you see that the Chichesters had a stranger with them this morning?" said Miss Lavinia.

"Do you mean the young lady dressed in black, my dear?" asked Mrs. Gregson.

"Yes. Poor thing!" replied Miss Lavinia. "Black did not become her, did it? Do you know who she was, mamma?"

"No, my dear," said Mrs. Gregson; "but as Lady Mildred arrived from Paris only a few weeks ago, she may have brought this young lady with her."

"By Jove!" exclaimed Mr. Hartfield, "I've got it."

"Got what, sir?" growled Mr. Gregson. "Not a bone down your throat, I hope."

"No, not a bone," replied Clarence Hartfield, relapsing into his lethargic state; "but—a—the clue to a problem I've been endeavouring to solve all the morning. Given, a young lady's face in church, which you recognize: quewy, when did you see it?" and he chuckled.

"Have you seen her before, then?" asked Bella and Lavinia, eagerly, with an almost painful curiosity.

"Yes," replied Hartfield; "on the Calais boat."

"You came over with them?" suggested Miss Bella.

"How singular!" said Miss Bella; "quite a coincidence, I declare. How funny it will be to meet as strangers after going through that terrible voyage together."

"We shan't meet as strangers," said Clarence,

quietly. "My people know Lady Mildred—at least, I think they do, and I shall give her a call to-morrow."

Both the girls tried to smile as they said "Yes," but it was hard work, for the demons of fear and jealousy were at work within their bosoms.

Were they going to have their prey taken from their nets at the very moment they flattered themselves they were hauling him up.

"The Honourable Clarence Hartfield," said Lady Mildred, reading the card which a servant brought her. "Why, Carlotta, my dear, that must be the good-looking gentleman who was so attentive on board the packet. I am sure that was the name I heard."

"How strange," said Carlotta. "Do you know him, Lady Mildred?"

"That is just what I was asking myself," said Lady Mildred. "Hartfield, Hartfield! Dear me—yes, I remember. I know his people, my dear. All right, James," and in a few minutes the Honourable Mr. Clarence Hartfield entered.

The usual salutations were gone through, and Mr. Hartfield, quite at home in a lounge chair, was calling to her ladyship's mind several little parties at which they had met, when Lady Mildred, with her usual suddenness, said,—

"Mr. Hartfield, you are quite ignoring the subject, but I must insist upon thanking you for your kindness during that frightful journey. I do not know what we should have done without you. It was strange I should not have remembered you."

"Not at all," said Mr. Hartfield, who was conversing with a great deal more life and much less languor than he displayed at the Folly, "not at all. I don't think I showed more than the tip of my nose, which is not a very recognizable feature—eh, Miss Lawley? Besides, it was so dark, and there was so much confusion, that in fact I never expected you to remember."

And Mr. Clarence smiled with due humility; then, turning to Carlotta, said,—

"The voyage must have tried you severely; nasty twip. By Jove! I've heard fellows say that they'd sooner go to Pew than to Paw by water. They couldn't go by any other way though, could they?"

Carlotta smiled; the question did not admit of a verbal reply.

"I am staying at the Folly," he continued.

"Do you know the Gregsons?"

"I had never seen Grassmere before we arrived three weeks since," she said.

"Charming ladies, the Misses Gregson are," said he. "Do you know them, Lady Mildred?"

Her ladyship shook her head and smiled blandly.

"We have not met," she said, significantly.

Mr. Hartfield, not a bit nonplussed, drawled on,—

"That's a pity. Your ladyship would find them interesting girls—very amusing, by Jove! So is Mr. Gregson, most original," and he smiled—"quite a chawwater in his way, you know."

"Yes," said her ladyship, and, anxious to change the subject, she asked after the condition of the ice.

"First water," replied the exquisite. "Do you skate?" he inquired of Carlotta.

"A little," she said. "I am very fond of it."

"Why didn't you say so, my dear?" said Lady Mildred. "We could have gone to the pond."

Carlotta smiled.

"I never thought of it," she said. "Besides, I had no skates."

Clarence Hartfield looked up eagerly.

"I'll tell you better fun than skating," he said, "that's slogging. It's glorious, Lady Mildred! I had a sledge coming down from London, it ought to have been here a week ago, but the wascal forgot to send it. Will you permit me to bring it over some day and give you and Miss Lawley a wide?"

"You are very kind," said Lady Mildred, looking over at Carlotta, across whose brow a cloud swept swiftly. "You would enjoy it, my dear, would you not?"

"Very much indeed!" replied the beautiful girl, with a smile. "It would be delightful!"

"Delightful! 'I'll bring it!' exclaimed the aristocrat, with a chuckle, rising to go. 'I'll bring it and we'll dwine all wound the lake—eh? Ha, ha!'"

He laughed with quiet enjoyment, in which Lady Mildred, immensely amused at his languid delight, joined, and Carlotta, though the cloud swept once more across her brow, chimed in.

Before the laugh was over the door opened and Chudleigh was announced.

He started with a slight frown at the sight of the honourable Clarence, but bowed courteously as his aunt made the two men known to each other.

A few words passed between them on the usual topic, the weather, and then Mr. Hartfield made his adieux, muttering as he lounged towards the folly,—

"Deuced nice girl. By Jove! wonder if she is the old lady's niece—no relation whatever should say from the likeness; how absurd! I mean the no likeness. And that long, big-browed fellow is Sir Chichester's son. Looked rather annoyed at seeing me there. Wonder if he's sweet on that girl. By Jove! she's a queen. Clarence, my boy, you're hit, you're hit, Clarence!"

Meanwhile Chudleigh was trying to recover his temper and make himself agreeable.

"Maud asked me to bring you this," he said, handing a small parcel to Carlotta—"some piece of spider spinning, as I call crochet, or woolwork," he added, smiling.

"No," she said, cutting the string. "It's a volume containing some engraving I want to copy," holding it out to him.

"You draw," he said, "or paint?"

"Both a little," she replied. "I am very fond of the pastime, and waste a deal of good paper and colour over my fancy."

"Nonsense, Carlotta," said Lady Mildred. "Chudleigh, get her to show you her sketch-book," she added. "I am going to see the gardener, who is waiting."

Chudleigh looked supplicatingly.

"Will you show it me?" he said.

"Yes," she said, "if you would really like to see it," and going to a bureau she took from a drawer a small portfolio. "There they are," she said. "I am ashamed to let you see them, they are such imperfect daubs."

"Daubs!" he exclaimed, reverently taking one up and starting with something like pain, for in the beautiful sketch before him he saw the evidence of an accomplishment which added an increased lustre to the beautiful girl, who seemed already in beauty and talent far above his reach. "They are wonderful," he said, quietly. "I'm no artist myself, but I feel assured that these are beautiful. Will you let me show them to Sir Fielding?"

"No, no," she said, hastily, in her eagerness laying one white hand upon the portfolio.

Chudleigh looked surprised. There was something more than deprecating modesty in the frightened tone and gesture.

She noticed his look of surprise, and her face paled.

"Excuse my refusal," she said. "They would give no pleasure to Sir Fielding; they are worthless, believe me. You see, I may safely say so, although you have been kind enough to praise them, because you own that you are no artist, and, however, unsuccessfully, I have been a student of art."

All this she said hurriedly and as if with the object of covering the pained "No, no," with which she had refused, but Chudleigh's curiosity, backed though it was with the reverence a growing love inspires, was too deep to be evaded.

"Why were you so alarmed at the idea of my father seeing them?" he said, with a smile.

She looked at him for a moment with a strange expression in her eyes.

"If you must know," she said, "I will tell you, Mr. Chichester. These sketches are painful mementoes of a bitter, very bitter past, when I painted them and their fellows for my daily bread. Can you guess why I should not like the records of my poverty to display themselves in the luxury of Chichester Hall?"

Chudleigh dropped the sketches and turned towards her, his face as pale as hers and his lips quivering.

"Can you forgive me?" he murmured, brokenly.

At the sight of his face and the sound of his distressed voice her own self-possession, which she had never lost for a moment, became strengthened, and, laughing lightly, she said, holding out her hand,—

"Forgive you! What for, Mr. Chichester! Rather let me ask your pardon for a piece of silly sensitiveness."

He took her hand, and, pressing it within his own strong one, was about to raise it to his lips when the white fingers were calmly but resolutely withdrawn and the next moment Lady Mildred's entrance put an end to a scene which was not altogether a painful one for either Chudleigh or Carlotta.

CHAPTER VIII.

FILLED with curiosity though they were the inhabitants of Grassmere had to restrain it in the direction of the Rectory, for nothing could be more mysterious, silent, or unsatisfactory than the conduct of its owner.

Since his appearance in the church he had been seen but twice—once when he had traversed the village in search of an old woman who had been hopelessly dumb for years, and to whom he consigned the care of the Rectory—and again when he visited the carpenter with instructions to replace the broken wicket with a strong oaken gate and the glassless window panes with blackened wood.

Two rooms were cleansed from their time-honoured dust, some of the old oaken furniture, with its faded velvet and armorial bearings, carried into them, and in these Maurice Durant lived, buried from the world.

Since Sir Fielding's first invitation had been so curtly refused, he had left the Rector undisturbed, although everyone at The Hall and The Cottage was most anxious to see more of him, and, with the exception of Maud, continually talked of him.

She, singularly enough, kept silent whenever the subject was brought up, and listened sometimes with a pained flush to some remark of Chudleigh concerning Maurice Durant and his strange retirement.

Indeed Maud had undergone some change since that evening when the tall figure had startled her by its sudden appearance, and had grown quiet and somewhat pensive, sitting thoughtfully alone where she used to be singing blithely, and often relapsing into a fit of abstraction during meals of which she used to be the life.

(To be continued.)

FORTUNE'S MISTAKE.

—10:—

CHAPTER XXIII.

FORTUNE LANGLEY only stayed about three months in the training institution. One bright spring day on returning from a long round of visits to her poor patients, she was met by the news that a lady was waiting to see her; the girl's thoughts flew to Chrissie (now Mrs. Fane), whose honeymoon must be nearly over, but the visitor proved to be Lady Darnley, whom she had not seen since they left Carlyon together in September.

"My dear child," cried the kind old lady as she kissed her favourite, "why have you hidden yourself from your friends, Mr. Dover has looked everywhere for you, and so have I; it was only by the merest accident I discovered you were here, and now I want you to come home with me; I am a lonely old woman, and I am sure no one can need you more than I do."

In vain Fortune pleaded she had undertaken

to remain in the institution till June. Lady Darnley saw the matron; perhaps the fact that her lady-ship was a large subscriber had some influence with Miss Hobbs, perhaps that kindly woman had noticed how thin and tired Miss Langley looked, and had decided in her own mind she was not strong enough for district nursing, any way she made not the least objection to Fortune's leaving her in a week's time; and with the promise that her favourite would come to her then, Lady Darnley took her leave.

When Fortune went to the beautifully arranged house at the West-End, where everything spoke of wealth and refinement, she received such a welcome as her own mother might have given her. The old lady, who had outlived all her kindred, and the young girl whose life was so strangely desolate, seemed strangely drawn together, and Fortune felt she had found a home where someone really wanted her.

She had been there some days before Lady Darnley spoke of Dene.

"My dear," she said, kindly, "don't tell me if it pains you, but have you heard anything of your brother?"

"He has never written to me; but I know from others that he married Iris Belden, and is abroad."

"I had hoped you might know his address. I have the greatest wish to write to Dene. I fear, my dear, that through my foolish sensitiveness I have done him an injury."

"I am sure you never injured anyone, dear Aunt Mary, but—don't they know his address at the Court?"

"No one knows it, Fortune. In January he wrote to Mr. Dover that he should be travelling for some months, and George Armstrong had his authority to act for him in all things relating to the estate; that is the last anyone has heard from your brother."

Fortune trembled.

"You are keeping something back because you think it will pain me, but, indeed, indeed, I would rather know the worst."

"I meant to tell you, I had rather you should hear it from me. Dene gave orders before he went that the library and morning-room should be dismantled and altered past recognition; those two rooms were associated with the tragedy of Eric's death, and I think it most natural his cousin should wish them to be done away with, but people will be spiteful, and there is a rumour about near Carlyon that the Earl knew more of his predecessor's death than other people."

Fortune had grown white as death, the old lady took her hand tenderly.

"Come child, be brave, or I shall feel sorry I told you. I have not the least doubt myself that this cruel slander reached your brother, and made him hide himself away from Norfolk, and I want to find Dene, because I can tell him something which will relieve his mind and help him to prove to the whole world how base was the suspicion."

"Lady Darnley—Aunt Mary, I believed it, too. I would not live with Dene or share his fortune, because I thought it—"

She burst into tears.

"Don't reproach yourself, dear," said Lady Darnley, tenderly, "if anyone deserves blame it is I. Fortune, at the time of Eric's death I consulted Mr. Dover as to whether I ought to publish what I knew, and he said, 'No, everyone believed Lord Carlyon's death to be purely accidental, and that if ever anyone was suspected of killing him, it would be time enough for me to speak.'"

"And what did you know?"

"My dear, there was insanity in Eric's blood; his mother was not dead as he and all the world believed, but a living woman who had spent more than twenty years in a mad-house; for centuries the taint had been in her family, each generation of the O'Floyds had at least one victim to insanity, and always one with the strange combination of black hair and deep blue eyes."

"And you think—"

"I think that distrusting his fiancée Eric went

out and shot himself. His mother had attempted his life as a baby, and since then attempted her own. Only a sensitive anxiety for the honour of the Carlyons prevented my revealing this at the inquest, but Mr. Dover saw how much the thought cost me, and gave me the advice I told you."

"Aunt Mary, if you are right I shall never be able to forgive myself, you can't think what harsh thoughts I have had of Dene, and, besides, I had proof." And she went on to tell of the silver match box with her brother's initials, the stranger had picked up on the spot where Lord Carlyon's body was found.

"Fortune," said Lady Darnley, gravely, "I believe my theory is the right one, but I can understand that Dene may have found his cousin, and, alarmed at the idea suspicion might fix on him, kept silence. You say he met you near the spot."

"Yes, after the shot was fired. I heard the report of the gun first."

"Then, depend upon it, Dene either witnessed the tragedy or came to the spot just afterwards. Ku wing he was the only person in the world to benefit by poor Eric's death, a fear seized him that if he carried the story to the Court suspicion might fall on him."

Fortune looked very troubled.

"I can't understand his marrying Iris Belden; she must remind him continually of Eric."

"I never liked Iris," admitted Lady Darnley; "but, from the first time he saw her, Dene seemed attracted to her. She would suit him far better than she could have suited Eric, and, Fortune, you and I must do Iris this justice, she cannot have married your brother from mercenary motives, since she has lived in retirement almost all her wedded life."

"I had forsaken and misjudged him," said Fortune, sadly; "and Dene was too weak to stand alone, so he turned to her."

"And, perhaps, is very haughty with her," said the elder woman, gently. "My dear, men don't like always trying to reach up to a goal far beyond them. Dene could never come up to your standard of truth and honour; he would be happier with a wife of a lower type."

"Isn't it right to aim at the highest?" asked Fortune, slowly.

"Yes, child, yes; but its wearying to human nature. Your brother was very human—not sinful."

"If we could find Dene, what would you do next?" asked Fortune.

"Go down to Carlyon Court as his guest, and inform every creature who came to call on me of the truth about Eric's mother. My dear, in three weeks I should have crushed the rumour about your brother for ever."

"Couldn't we try to find him?" asked Fortune, wisely. "Dene and Iris are both so fond of society that it seems impossible they can be hidden. Then they are such a remarkable-looking couple, they must excite attention. I want to ask Dene's pardon for my mistake. I do wish we could find them."

She was to wish it yet more soon.

One bright June day a ragged little urchin came to Lady Darnley's house with a request to see "the young lady." This was so vague and his general appearance so forbidding, that the servants might have refused to listen to him, only at that very moment the carriage drew up and, as Miss Langley followed her kind hostess to the house, the boy ran up to her and caught hold of her dress.

"You must come," he said, strangely; "he's dying!"

"Who?" cried Fortune, not sure in her bewilderment if the message could refer to Dene, but the answer was: "Mr. Hill, what lives with us. Him as give you the silver match box."

The last words held the clue. A hasty explanation to Lady Darnley and Fortune was driving toward Westminster, Tom on the box, not only to steer the coachman in the right direction, but because his rags were manifestly unfit for the inside of the Victoria.

John Hill was dying. There was no mistake about his danger. He signed to the woman watching by him to go out and leave him alone with his visitor.

"You are not afraid," he asked Fortune.

"No. I am ready to listen to all you have to tell me."

"I reckon you remember me, though you've only seen me once."

"I remember you perfectly."

"Well, you took me for a convalescent or something, but I'd come down from London just to see Lord Carlyon. I didn't choose to go up to the house and ask for him, so I just prowled about, hoping to come upon him, but it was only the day of his death I succeeded. I saw the Earl die! I'm the only living creature save one who knows the rights of his death, and I sent for you here to tell you the truth before I die. I haven't seen many good women, Miss Langley, but I fancy you're one of 'em, and I'd like to make you a bit happier before I go."

Fortune gave him a cordial which stood in readiness on a little table by the bed.

"When I saw Lord Carlyon that day," went on the dying man, "he was as mad as any poor creature shut up in an asylum. He'd just picked up a gun and was pointing it at his own breast when another man came up and tried to wrest it from him. I knew him at once; it was one who'd been pointed out to me as Dene Langley, the Earl's cousin."

"My brother."

"Yes. Well, he did what man could to save Lord Carlyon, and, just as he thought he'd got the better in the struggle, and held the gun in his own hand, it went off. Miss Langley, its perfect truth that your brother shot his cousin, but it was a pure accident, and it happened just because he was trying to get the weapon from him."

"Please go on."

"There's not much more to tell. Mr. Langley got scared, I suppose, at the idea of people disbelieving his story, and so he left his cousin where he fell and went home as though nothing had happened—a dreadful mistake, but one natural enough to a nervous man. I stooped down after he had gone and picked up two things, the match-box I gave to you and a letter from Lord Carlyon to his cousin, which would have made things look pretty black against Mr. Langley. Well, I must tell you a bit about myself, or I can't make it clear. Long ago—when I was a mere boy—I was in love with Iris Belden. She treated me shamefully, and I swore to be revenged on her. I was at Carlyon only to open the Earl's eyes to her true character. He was killed before I managed to speak to him. Then I heard a rumour she was to marry his cousin. I had still the letter I have mentioned. I could swear—with truth—I saw Dene Langley shoot Lord Carlyon. I presented myself at the Court, and threatened the new Earl I'd tell all I knew unless he bribed me to hold my tongue."

"Well, he paid a pretty price, I turned up whenever I wanted money. I followed him to Paris when he was on his honeymoon. I threatened to tell his wife. I made his life one long misery."

"How could you?" breathed Fortune, "at least he had never injured you."

"He'd done a thing I hated him for: he had taught Iris Belden she had a heart, and won that heart for himself. He told her the truth, and do you think she turned from him? she only clung the closer to him; he sent me five hundred pounds, with a note saying I should receive the same amount every six months so long as I held my tongue, but it was of no use for me to try and ask for more."

"And then he left Paris, I suppose?" said Fortune. "You know, of course, nothing has been heard of him or his wife since January!"

"I know; but when they hear I'm dead (and they won't have long to wait), they'll hide themselves no longer. Tell Iris I forgave her, Miss Langley, and I hope she'll be happy yet with the man she loves, and give her this, I got it written down by a lawyer, and it's signed and witnessed properly; he says it's enough to acquit Lord Carlyon in any court of law, if he should be accused of his cousin's murder."

Fortune took the packet, then she looked down pityingly on the dying man. Truly John Hill's revenge had not brought him much.

"I will tell her; Iris will understand your did for her sake."

"Ay, and Miss Langley you're a good woman—be kind to Iris—she never had a chance; she was brought up among cards, and dunnos, and brandy, she never had a chance of being—like you. And remember this, she may be a sinner, but she has loved your brother very truly, and been to him like a ministering angel in his darkest days."

Fortune's eyes filled with tears. "If only I could find them."

"I can tell you where they are, but you must promise me not to go there or write until you hear of my death. . . . Lord and Lady Carlyon are living at Stevenage."

CHAPTER XXIV.

JOHN HILL's landlady did not hurry herself to send Miss Langley the news of his death; she waited till the day after the funeral, but Fortune had not been idle; she and Lady Darnley had been to see Mr. Dover, and told him all they knew.

The lawyer had engaged rooms for them in a pretty little house at Stevenage; but he told them frankly he did not believe they would find the Carlyons there.

"It's quite a small place, and an Earl and Countess would make quite a commotion there, besides I've friends at Stevenage; I was staying there myself last month, and they would have told me."

The brief message from Westminster received, Lady Darnley and Fortune started at once for Stevenage; Mr. Dover met them at King's Cross, and saw them into the train.

"I have only just remembered there are two strangers staying at Stevenage, who attract a great many speculations; she is described as a very stylish looking woman, while her husband is an invalid, who is never seen out of doors without blue spectacles. If all inquiries fail it might be worth your while to call at Fairlawn, and ask to see Mr. and Mrs. Court."

All inquiries did fail, and on the third day after her arrival in the quiet Hertfordshire town, Fortune made up her mind to the effort and walked up the short carriage drive to Fairlawn.

How she might have fared with a stranger was a different matter, but Elizabeth Carter opened the door and at once recognised Miss Langley, whom she had of course seen frequently when staying at Carlyon Court with her mistress; there came a look of unutterable relief to the pleasant face as she said earnestly,—

"My lady will be thankful to see you, Miss Langley; she wrote to beg you to come but was afraid the letter might not reach you, as she heard you had left Guilford street."

"I have been in Stevenage three days," said Fortune, "trying to find them. I was told they were staying near Stevenage under an assumed name."

Elizabeth had ushered her visitor into the drawing-room, the strange hush which hung over the whole house struck Fortune with a sense of terror.

"Is there anything the matter?" she asked anxiously. "Is my brother ill?"

"He's sinking fast, miss; the doctor thinks he can't live out the week, and my lady's pretty well heart broken."

She was coming in, even then. Fortune was amazed; could this sad, heavy-eyed woman with the terrible care stamped on her face be the brilliant coquette she had known at Carlyon Court?

Words failed her, but she did what perhaps was better than the tenderest words, she put her arms round Iris and kissed her.

They were quite alone. Elizabeth had gone to take her lady's place in the sick room.

"Iris," said Fortune gently, "I have brought something which will, I think, give you and Dene peace of mind. I was with John Hill when he was dying, and he asked me to put this paper into your own hands. Read it, it will bring you comfort."

Iris ran her eyes down the brief statement, and turned to Fortune with a sob.

"I never doubted Dene—never once! But, oh, to have his story proved, it is such comfort!"

"And you deserve it!" said Fortune. "I do not, Iris; I shall never forgive myself for being so ready to think harshly of my brother."

"It was natural," said Lady Carlyon, kindly; "and I—do you know, Fortune—I was actually glad when I heard of John Hill's death; it seemed to me it set us free."

"I think I know everything down to your leaving Paris," said Fortune; "have you been here ever since?"

"Only since April; we travelled constantly, as long as I thought change of scene would do Dene any good. But when an English doctor, in Vienna, told me he could never be cured, and that he had only a few months to live, I brought him here, it seemed to me he must have a home to die in."

Fortune's tears fell thick and fast.

"But, what is it?" she asked; "Dene always seemed so strong."

"I think it was the morbid feeling he was really guilty of Eric's death. And, at first, you see, the thought preyed on him; his nerves got disordered, and he began to take morphia in large quantities; then, no doubt, John Hill's persecution helped matters on. When we were first married, I felt he was very strange, but it took me weeks to discover the trouble pressing on him—and then it was too late."

"Too late!"

"The habit of taking morphia, and other drugs, had so grown upon him that he could not live without them. The physicians we consulted abroad said it would be dangerous to try to deny him them entirely. I have done what I could, but it was a terrible struggle."

Fortune's hand closed over Lady Carlyon's slender fingers.

"May I see him—will he forgive me?"

"He will not remember there is any cause for forgiveness," said the wife; "the events of last September are a blank to him; it is as though all that was painful and sad had faded from his memory, and he was just a tired out child sinking to rest."

Tears rained down Fortune's cheeks.

"I was so glad to bring you this," and she touched John Hill's statement, "and now it is of no use; it comes too late."

"Not too late to clear Dene's memory, if that is ever slandered," said Lady Carlyon, gently. "Now, let me take you to him."

There was nothing terrible or alarming in Dene's appearance; his face was quite as beautiful as it had been in health; but it did not need the experience Fortune had gathered in those months of district nursing to tell her that he was dying.

Dying! The last of an ancient name, the master of untold wealth, dying! And the bitterest part of it to the wife and sister, who watched him, was that they dared not pray for him to be spared.

It was a life of misused talents, of wasted opportunities. Dene Langley had sinned and suffered, and perhaps the truest epithet that could be written over his grave was, that he was "weak and erring."

"I have brought Fortune to see you," said Iris, much in the tone one uses to a sick child; "he will stay and talk a little, if you are not tired."

There was no surprise in Dene's face; if he had seen his sister day after day ever since he came to Sevenage his manner could not have been more tranquil.

Fortune sat down close to his sofa, longing to talk to him, and yet silent for fear of breaking down.

She had pictured Dene a little indignant perhaps for her doubts of him, but grateful to her for bringing John Hill's statement, and for her friendly manner to his wife; and, lo! Dene could not even hear of the statement, and seemed unconscious that he had anything to forgive his sister; clearly she must talk to him only on trivial matters; and somehow nothing trivial would come into her mind. It was Iris who broke the silence which had gathered on them.

"It is such a lovely morning, Dene, if only you

felt it a little stronger, I would take you and Fortune for a drive."

He shook his head.

"I'm too tired; we must take Fortune round the garden instead; it's such a dear old-fashioned garden, Fortune, just like the one we had at Marden Royal, and there's a great bed of your favourite, sweet lavender."

Sweet lavender! It seemed to Fortune that the very word carried her back to the July day, almost a year ago, when she had spent one of her hard-earned pennies on a bunch of that same sweet lavender. She had worn it in her waist-band when she met Paul, and heard he was going to Netherthorn Castle that very day. He had placed part of the spray in his coat, telling her sweet lavender always reminded him of her. What had become of that withered lavender now? The Honourable Mrs. Hardy would hardly approve of its being preserved.

And then Fortune came back with a start from this train of thought to the scene before her.

"How is the old place in Guilford Street looking, Fortune; is Mrs. Cox as desponding as she used to be, and do you still like copying?"

"I have not done any copying for months, Dene; but I want to hear about you; what have you been doing—you and Iris?"

"Not much." And Dene turned to his wife with a glance of deep love. "I've been ill, you know, and Iris has had to look after me. I tell her, when I'm better, Eric must ask us both on a long visit to Carlyon Court; he's such a good chap, Eric, he'd not be ashamed of his poor relations!"

This was dreadful! Did his mind often wander? the sister asked herself; and how did his wife bear it? No wonder Iris looked wan and aged; though, to Fortune's mind, far more womanly and gentle than in other days.

The doctor came in presently. He could do little for the patient; but Iris liked to have him, he must have guessed some strange secret was hidden at Fairlawn, but to his honour he never sought to discover it. He never showed, either by word or deed, that he thought there was anything mysterious about Mr. and Mrs. Court.

Fortune was briefly introduced to him as "my husband's sister." She was thankful to Iris for suffering her to remain in the drawing-room and hear his verdict.

"A little weaker—but that we must expect."

"Is there no hope?" cried Fortune, wildly. "Can nothing be done to give him a chance of life?"

"Nothing, and, my dear young lady," added the doctor feelingly, "depend upon it it is better for him as it is. He feels no pain, he is just sinking into rest. If his body were stronger, he might linger for years with his mind impaired, dead to all that makes life valuable. You would not wish that!"

"No," said Fortune, meekly, "but there has never been insanity in our family, and—"

Iris had gone back to her invalid, Fortune and the doctor were alone.

"I gather you have not seen your brother very recently?" he said, gently.

"Not since last September."

"Ah! I have only known him for two months; but in that time I have seen enough to regard his death as a merciful release. It is not insanity. It is a strange case of disordered nerves. I should say that meeting some terrible shock, sleeplessness and low spirits followed. He had not the strength to resist them, and tried the effect of morphia and other drugs in large quantities."

"Some constitutions might have stood it; but his could not. His brain power has simply been destroyed. He is not violent or dangerous. He remembers some things perfectly, but he has no faculty of reasoning or of putting things together. If his bodily health had stood the strain he would have lived a maniac; to me it seems a merciful providence which has made the body decay equally with the mind, and so gradually that there will be no struggle, no painful scene, but he will go out of life just like the expiring of a candle."

"It must have been terrible for his wife."

"Aye," said the doctor, feelingly. "I believe

her whole soul is wrapped up in him. I am thankful you have come to be of some comfort to her."

Fortune put the matter to Iris simply, should she go or stay?

"I should like to be here," she said, "but I will go away if you would rather have him to yourself in these last days. It is your right."

"I would rather that you stayed," said Lady Carlyon, gravely. "he may ask for you, and though I misunderstood you once, I never did anything but respect you. You are a good woman, Fortune, and you will be happy some day. My poor boy and I were weak and erring so—"

She broke off with a sob. Fortune bent over her and kissed her.

"You mustn't think of the past," she said gently. "Whatever was wrong in it your suffering must have blotted out."

"Fortune," said Iris, suddenly, "in the old days you were engaged to be married. Forgive me, but why is your wedding put off?"

"It is more than put off," answered Fortune. "It will never be. My wedding is among the might-have-beens, Iris."

"But—"

"You must not blame Paul," said Fortune, earnestly. "He never wronged me, but—there was a mistake and last February he—married someone else."

"You poor child," and Iris looked at her sister-in-law pityingly. "I wanted to know, because I thought if all was right between you, you would like to ask him here—"

"Oh, no! Dene never liked him; but it is all ended now. I shall be a lonely old maid all my days. I have promised to stay with Lady Darnley while she wants me, after that I mean to be a hospital nurse."

Iris looked at her in mute surprise.

"Don't you know," she asked at last, "that the burden Dene found all too heavy will fall on you. Fortune, it is possible you don't know that when my husband dies, you will be Countess Carlyon?"

"No, oh, no! I do not want it."

"It is so, dear," said Iris, gravely, "and just because you never yearned for rank and wealth you will probably make a good use of them."

"But—you?"

"Dene settled a handsome income on me," said Iris, "everything else has to go with the title. He hoped, you know, and her thin face grew crimson, "a child of ours might bear that; but I am thankful it is not so. The honour of the Carlyons will be safe with you, Fortune."

Lady Darnley came to Fairlawn at Iris's invitation. Now the end was so near, now no fear of John Hill troubled her, poor Lady Carlyon's one anxiety was that there might be no after questions raised as to her husband's death. In a few words she told Dr. Hilton their true name, and how the Earl's morbid fancies had caused them to pass under an assumed one. Mr. Dover knew Lord Carlyon's whereabouts, and at the Court all the servants and villagers heard the truth, the young Earl was dying, he would never come back to the home of his forefathers, though his moral remains might rest there for a few hours on the way to the Carlyon vault.

And the end came suddenly at the last. They had been having tea in Dene's room and Fortune thought he seemed brighter than usual; Lady Darnley had gone for a stroll in the garden, Lord Carlyon's couch was moved to the open window, the fragrance of roses and sweet lavender filled the air.

Iris sat near her husband, her hand clasped in one of his, Fortune was near the foot of the couch her eyes wandering to the velvet lawn and brilliant flower beds; only a year ago what a vision of delight that beautiful old garden would have been to her and now—well, she felt she would have gone back to Guilford Street for the rest of her days and never have asked to see a green field or a summer flower if only Dene could have been given back to her as he had been a year ago.

"Fortune," said Dene suddenly and both the listeners thought how strong and clear his voice sounded, "where is Paul Hardy?"



THE END CAME SUDDENLY TO LORD CARLYON AT THE LAST, LAYING ON HIS COUCH BY THE OPEN WINDOW.

Answer him she could not, a lump rose in her throat and nearly choked her. Iris, with ready wit, took the reply on herself.

"Don't you remember, Dene, he went to Netherton to be secretary to Lord Fane?"

"Ah, yes," Carlyon put one hand to his head as though trying to think, "but he might get a holiday. I am sure they would spare him just for a day, I want to say good-bye to him before I go away."

"It is too far for him to come," said Lady Carlyon, "you must trust me with your message Dene."

"It isn't much—tell Paul I see clearer now, and I know he was made of better stuff than me, I used to be jealous of him in the old days, but you must tell him, Iris, that is past and gone. I'm glad that he's going to have Fortune. I give all my share of her to him."

The tears poured down Lady Carlyon's face; quick witted to a degree she guessed pretty clearly what had parted Paul and her sister-in-law; it was too late now to make right Fortune's mistake and to Iris there was something terribly pathetic in poor Dene's legacy—a legacy which Paul Hardy could never claim.

"I will tell him Dene."

"She will never have to tire herself any more," went on Dene, still thinking of his sister; "she used to work so hard in those old times and yet I don't think she was unhappy."

Fortune turned from the window, her emotion had passed now and she could meet her brother's eyes.

"I was very happy Dene; I have never been so happy since."

"You'll be happier yet," replied Lord Carlyon, "and you mustn't forget Iris."

"She shall be my sister always, Dene," answered the girl firmly, "I shall never forget how she loved you."

The evening wore on, the sun sank in a golden glory in the west and twilight gathered. Iris would have closed the window and rung for lights but Lord Carlyon prevented her.

"I like it best as it is," he said, gently. "I always loved to see the sun set. Iris, I think I shall see it rise in Heaven."

So the two women who loved him sat on in the gathering gloom; a kind of solemn hush had fallen upon the room like the silence in an empty church, and it came on Iris almost as a jarring note when Elizabeth opened the door carrying a lamp.

"Take care," she whispered, "you will disturb your master."

But nothing earthly would disturb Dene any more. In that deep sweet hush his spirit had gone to its Maker. He was at rest now, the burden of life was lifted. Lord Carlyon had been right, he would see the sun rise in Heaven.

They led his wife—his widow now—from the room, calm and dry eyed, but Fortune flung herself on her knees by the sofa and wept as though her heart would break.

Was she crying for her mistake. The one harsh thought she had cherished against this idolized brother, was she crying for the promise of the young life so blighted and cut short or for the old happy days of struggling poverty that could never come again?

"Dear, it is better so," said kind Lady Darnley, when she at last got her favourite safely into her own keeping; "his life must have been a shadowed one at best, and now he is at rest."

"Oh, Aunt Mary," sobbed the girl, "why couldn't I die instead of Dene, he had Iris to love him, Iris to live for and I have nothing, nobody."

Lady Darnley passed her hand caressingly over the girl's bowed head.

"You must be brave, Fortune, a great power rests in your hands, dear; your life need not be cold and loveless because the greatest earthly love of all has been taken from you; there is a crown saved up, darling, for those who fight life's battle bravely, the reward of peace and content."

"Mr. Dover is asking to see you, my lady," came Elizabeth's voice.

At first Fortune thought the maid was speaking to Lady Darnley; then the truth dawned on her

she was the person meant, for the burden of poor Dene's responsibilities had fallen on her, and the sometime copying clerk was Countess Carlyon.

(To be continued.)

PAINT from potatoes is something of a novelty. To produce it you boil a kilo of peeled potatoes in water; after mashing, dilute with water and pass through a fine sieve. Add two kilos of Spanish white diluted with four kilos of water, and the result will be a colour of beautiful milk white. Different colours can be effected by the addition of different ochres or minerals. It is stated that the paint so made is cheap, and, applied with a brush in the usual way, adheres to plaster and wood very well and will not peel.

"GOOD MORNING SIR!"

Such is the kindly wish spoken by a dainty maiden dressed in the old-world style of long ago, whose picture is given away with this week's issue. The modern girl is practical and self-reliant, she has found many fresh fields to conquer, but she lacks the quaint, old-fashioned grace of her grandmother. The modern girl is more useful than the maiden in brocaded skirts and poke bonnet, whose acquaintance we invite all our readers to make, but she is less romantic. This is a world of change, the damsel of the past with all quaint grace, her courtly dignity, and her sweet shy helplessness, will soon be forgotten, and so we offer her picture to all our readers that they may see a heroine of the days when this century was young, bidding her cavalier "Good Morning, Sir!"



"GREAT HEAVEN—AYLMER CLARE!" EXCLAIMED THE UNHAPPY WOMAN, DASHING THE MONEY ASIDE.

A HERO IN THE STRIFE.

[A NOVELETTE.]

CHAPTER I.

"WELL, girls, it must be as you please," said Mrs. Julian, "only if the arrangement should not be quite so pleasant as you fancy don't blame me. Of course it is very nice and flattering of Esperance to wish to share our home, but, on the other hand, she is a beauty and may prove *exigente*." She glanced wistfully at the faces of her two daughters; dearly as she loved them she was not blind to their homeliness, and she feared lest their chances of marriage might be minimised by the residence of a young and lovely girl in their midst. Men think so much more of beauty than any other more lasting attribute. But Kathie, the youngest, smiled at her fears.

"Now, mamma, you are trying to look on the dark side, and constitutionally you are incapable of doing it. Esperance is beautiful, certainly, but she never used to think about that, and why should she be changed? I never saw a girl who remembered herself so little. Do write that she may come."

"Oh, yes," added Violet, who was of a more practical turn of mind than her sister; "of course we have enough and a little to spare, but the sum Esperance offers to throw into the family purse will be very acceptable. Then, think, mamma, how very hard it is for a girl to be left quite alone in the world; see how you; she has no one."

The widow's eyes grew moist.

"Well, well, my dears, I daresay you are right, and I will wire the child to come on at once. I may even run up to town to meet her. Poor little girl! it was very unfortunate her father made choice of Mr. Darby as her guardian; Esperance never liked either him or his wife."

"Which she proves by breaking away from

them as soon as she is of age," smiled Kathie. "For my part I am quite longing to see her; it is three years since she came to Rosemount. What an age!"

"Don't you remember how Gabriel Westwood used to haunt her steps; poor Gabriel, I think he would have spoken had he not been so hampered with debts; but that is all over, and I should not be surprised if Esperance finally became Mrs. Westwood of Poole House," said Violet meditatively, "that would be pleasant."

Mrs. Julian went away to write her message, and the girls chatted on about the new-comer, being distinctly pleased at the idea of a companion; they were plain girls, certainly, but they were good, and, as their mother secretly thought, the man who won either would win a treasure.

Mrs. Julian was the widow of a government official, and beside her own small annuity received a comfortable pension, so that she and her daughters mixed with the best society Rosemount and its neighbourhood afforded. Esperance Morton was a very distant relative of her deceased husband; an heiress in a small way, and orphaned five years ago; her father dying had left her to the care of his wife's cousins—a most unwise choice of guardians. The girl neither liked nor respected them, and now being her own mistress had written begging Mrs. Julian to receive her. That lady duly sent her reply, following it by the earliest possible train; for having once made up her mind to receive Esperance, she was not the one to stint her either of attention or affection. Meanwhile Violet and Kathie made all manner of preparations for their cousin's arrival and reception; really Esperance Morton was a cousin four times removed, but the girls liked her so much, and were naturally so affectionate that they claimed her quite as their own. They went into the village to make sundry purchases at the one shop, where everything from a frying-pan to a lace bonnet was sold, and on their way they met Mr. Gabriel Westwood, squire of Rosemount, master of Poole House.

"Mother has gone to town," said Violet, when they had shaken hands, "but she returns to-night—with a visitor. Aren't you a little bit curious, Gabriel?"

"Not in the least," a smile breaking the firm line of his lips; "I am only filled with wonder that Mrs. Julian has ventured so far alone."

"We wanted to go, too," laughed Kathie, "but mother said 'No'; she is quite a host in herself on occasion; and now guess who has so great a claim upon her regard to take her out of her shell?"

"I never was good at conundrums, Kathie; I wait to be enlightened by you."

"Oh, how stupid you are! why it is Esperance Morton, and she is coming, not for a visit, but to live with us *always*."

The grave, dark face flushed.

"That will be very nice for you," but Kathie's blue eyes were full of mischief as she asked, "aren't you pleased, too? I thought you liked our cousin; but now I incline to the belief that you had forgotten her until I recalled her to your memory."

"I had not forgotten," he answered steadily, "it would be hard indeed to forget such a very beautiful girl as Miss Morton."

"Oh, I must tell her that; really she ought to be flattered," smiled Violet. "Gabriel, you are becoming quite a courtier. Come up to-night if only just to see Esperance—we shall be very glad."

"Not to-night, thank you. Mrs. Julian will be tired; but to-morrow morning if I may."

"Of course you may. Do we ever stand upon ceremony with you, Gay?" and after a few inconsequential words the girls went their way and he his.

"Violet," said Kathie, "Gabriel loves her still; I am sure of it. Did you see how his face changed at the mere mention of her name, and what a glad note crept into his voice? Oh, we shall have a wedding soon. I wish I could think so; but Esperance did not seem particularly drawn

to him when she was last here; and he is worthy a woman's best love."

Quite late that evening Miss Morton arrived. She was a tall, graceful girl, with corn-coloured hair, great grey eyes, and a lovely face—which lost nothing of its loveliness for the little touch of pride upon it.

Violet and Kathie—short, dumpy, sallow—might well have been excused a little jealousy had they shown it. But they did nothing of the kind; instead, they rushed to meet her, overpowering her almost with their embraces.

"What a darling you were to think of us when you were looking for a home; and, oh, how much we hope you will be happy with us," cried Katie. "Come in and rest; how very weary you must be—and, oh, mamma! isn't she lovelier than ever?"

Then Violet, who was busily engaged in removing their visitor's wraps, said,—

"We saw Gay to-day. He was very pleased to hear you were coming back. Such a number of things have happened to him since you were here last; but I don't intend telling you anything until to-morrow, because you look weary, and if we began talking we should continue until the morning."

Nothing could be more hearty than the welcome accorded to Esperance; a deep sense of comfort and rest possessed her that night as she crept into her dowdy bed. "They are nicer than ever," she thought, reflecting on Mrs. Julian's and her daughters' kindness. "I shall be very happy here. I do wonder no man has had the good sense to come a-wooing here; but there is plenty of time yet, Violet is only twenty-four and Kathie just a year my senior. Really, if I were a man, I should be puzzled which of the sisters to choose," and then she fell asleep, nor did she wake until the April sun was high in the heavens and the air was full of sound and scent.

Violet brought breakfast to her in her room.

"We would not disturb you," she said, seating herself by the window; "we knew how tired you must be. Mamma has not long been down, and, as she had business to transact at Great Rosemount, she thought she would do it before you were about. Kathie has gone with her—and, oh! I have you rested well!"

"Never better in my life," responded Esperance. "I have had a perfectly dreamless and most refreshing sleep; but I am sorry to have given you this trouble."

"It is no trouble," laughed Violet, "but a pleasure rather; and, as one can chat so much better in the privacy of one's chamber, I am very glad to get this opportunity of improving our acquaintance. We are going to be the best of friends, I hope."

"I hope so," answered Esperance. "Suppose you begin by telling me all about your ordinary, every-day life, and the people among whom I shall have to live."

"Well, there have been really no changes since you were here last, unless it is in Gay Westwood's lot (very injudiciously intruding the name of her favourite) and that has materially improved. I wonder if you would like to hear his story?"

"I shall be delighted," answered the other, trying to keep a tone of boredom from entering her speech. Truth to tell, she regarded Gabriel as an "impossibly good young man," who had shown a slight tendency of affection for herself; and Esperance disliked anything "giddy" on principle.

Fortunately, Violet was not quick to notice trifles; and so she began her little narrative in the pleasantest frame of mind.

"Everybody likes Gabriel."

Miss Morton's lips looked scornful. She wanted to say "Ah! he is 'Hail fellow, well met' with everybody," but she did not want to hurt Violet, so she remained silent.

"I ought to explain to you why he mixes so little with society when you were with us. Old Squire Westwood, his father, was a dreadfully extravagant and reckless man. When he died every acre of the estate—every stone of the house—was mortgaged to the full. Gabriel was only twenty—a lad at Oxford hoping to blossom one day into a physician. But when the truth was

made clear to him, he gave up his ambition, and, coming to Rosemount, set to work with a will to pay his father's creditors and save his home. He wrote articles for papers, he instructed the young boys of good family about here, he let Poole House, taking for himself a little cottage just on the outskirts of the village; he dismissed all unnecessary servants on the land, and himself abjured society. It was a hard life he led, but he bore it with Indian stoicism, and never complained even to us. Just before your visit, the people who had hired Poole House left, and, as his prospects had considerably improved, he returned to it; but he still had to live a hard and lonely life. Since then, however, a distant relative has died and left him not only enough to clear off the mortgage, but a handsome life annuity, and now he may safely take to himself a wife."

"It is to be hoped the lady he elects to that honour will be worthy it," smiled Esperance, a trifle satirically. "He is quite a model young man!"

"He is a hero!" corrected Violet, gravely, and a little grieved that the other showed such slight enthusiasm. "Fancy, ten years of the best part of his life devoted to paying other people's debts! The woman who marries Gabriel should esteem herself most fortunate."

"He is very praiseworthy indeed," said Esperance, with compunction. "I hope he will be rewarded in proportion. But things generally go by the rule of contrary in this world."

CHAPTER II.

ESPERANCE had settled down to life at The Larches and was very happy; nothing could exceed the kindness of Mrs. Julian and her daughters; and although in the elder lady's breast the hope that Gabriel would choose one of her own girls was now quite aslain, there was no change in her manner or feelings.

Gabriel was often at The Larches, but he had said nothing to Miss Morton which could be construed into anything more than friendship; only the Julians who knew him so well understood what the deepening and darkening of his dark eyes meant as they rested upon their relative; why so often his face changed at her slight, careless words, and, hoping to do him service, they praised him injudiciously, and at inopportune moments.

He did not think of her as Esperance; she had for him the more homely name of Hope, for one day during a discussion upon names Kathie had said, "Yours is a beautiful name, Esperance, but just a little too long for frequent use, Violet and I have been debating what to call you. Espy is not large enough for you, and Esper is not pretty."

"Esperance means hope; why not use that word as a diminutive, and just for the home circle?" said Gabriel speaking for the first time.

"Oh, thank you, Gay," cried Kathie clapping her hands, "it is just the thing we wanted. How clever you are; you always suggest the proper word at the proper time—and so it shall be Hope;" and just because Miss Morton had conceived a curious prejudice against the young man, she disliked her new name, but was too kindly to show this.

And the love which she had kindled in his heart three years ago deepened day by day, until there was no plan he made in which she was not included, no thought untinged by memories of her, no hope in which she was not involved.

One day he drove the party from The Larches to see some model cottages he was erecting, and just because they liked him so well the girls had drawn their mother away on some trivial pretence, leaving him alone with Esperance.

And before she discovered their absence it commenced to rain; looking round quickly for some sign of them, she said vexedly,—

"Where are the girls? they were here but a few minutes since; and if they are in the open they will be positively drenched!"—feeling nervous and confused she walked to the entrance and looked out.

Gabriel joined her.

"You had better come under shelter," he said quietly, "or you will share their fate; let me make you as comfortable as circumstances will allow, because all that we can do is to wait for the storm to subside, and for our friends' return."

"But," she said "you have apparently no regard for their safety or comfort."

"Violet and Kathie are sensible girls; they know the country and have probably found shelter long ago," here he dragged forward several small blocks of wood and rapidly constructing a seat motioned her towards it.

"I am not tired," she remarked, moving to a window, "I prefer to stand."

Perhaps she was hardly aware how ungracious her manner was; perhaps she read the story of his ever-increasing love, and not desiring it, hoped to kill it by her coldness.

However that might be, her face had lost much of its softness, whilst her lovely eyes had grown a little scornful. But Gabriel did not see this, as he approached her, resolved now or never to put his fate to the test.

"Hope," he began, "as I gave you that name I have surely most right to use it—Hope, I have something to say to you of the gravest importance to both."

"Then please leave it unsaid; I am not in the humour for serious matter—see, here are the girls and Mrs. Julian. It scarcely rains at all now, and they are not the least bit wet. The drive home will be very pleasant."

He bit his lips, with vexation as Kathie came running into the cottage—

"We are delightfully dry," she said, with a shrewd glance at the two by the window, "we found a big hollow tree, and all of us contrived to squeeze into it. It was close packing but we are not folks to make a fuss over trifles."

"How sweet the air is," remarked Violet, with the intention of giving the young people time to recover their composure (for of course Gay had proposed and been accepted), "and look, there is the loveliest rainbow! I am quite enjoying the afternoon and mamma is all the better for the outing."

The rain had quite ceased now; the waggonette was brought round, and they all started for home, Mrs. Julian saying kindly,

"Gabriel, you have worked miracles upon your estate; it is to be hoped your tenants will be duly grateful; there are no cottages like yours in all the county."

He smiled very sadly, "I don't know that they fulfil my expectations; and working single-handed as I do, I have many drawbacks."

"Well, you must marry; some nice, sensible girl who will help you in your labours—a woman if she is judicious and kind-hearted can do so much more than a man in many ways."

Gabriel's eyes sought Miss Morton's face, it expressed only indifference, and he turned his attention to his horses.

Now the Julians were the most hospitable people and insisted that he should stay to dinner; so he waited in the garden just outside the drawing-room windows, until the ladies had changed their dresses. And whilst he lingered he heard voices; the first said,—

"Oh, Gabriel is not here; I waited a long time before coming down, because I thought you and he would have much to say."

"What should Mr. Westwood have to say to me that you might not hear, Violet?" said the second voice (Hope's), "if you have any foolish ideas concerning us, pray disabuse yourself of them. He and I are hardly friends; we never could be more; I detest model young men."

His face was very white, as he moved quickly away; he understood now why she had so lightly advised him to marry "some nice sensible girl," she had seen his growing attachment, and would fain save him from the humiliation of rejection, herself from the pain of saying "no."

But there was a worse sting than this, conveyed in her words, "he and I are hardly friends; we never could be more; I detest model young men."

She did not even like or respect him; what a foul he had been to hope so much on such slight

grounds as she had given. She was courteous only because he was the girl's friend.

Up and down, up and down he paced until the gong sounded, then being a resolute, self-contained man, he entered the drawing room with scarcely any signs of his recent conflict upon him. It seemed to him that "Hope" had never looked so lovely as now; she wore a white gown high at the neck, with loose sleeves gathered in at the slender wrists by bands of crimson ribbon, and there were crimson roses at her breast.

The Julians when alone, or entertaining guests with whom they were on very familiar footing, made a sort of demi-toilet, and Hope had adopted this habit, saying it had a more home-like appearance and was infinitely more comfortable.

Gabriel took Mrs. Julian down, and throughout that long heavy evening he played his part to perfection; he even sang with Hope, Mendelssohn's duet, "I would that the love I bear thee," without any sign of pain, or any undue emphasis; but Kathie, who played the accompaniment, thought that his grave eyes had taken a graver, sadder look, and guessing much, was a trifle angry with Hope—they never called her E-perance now—they were such enthusiastic admirers and followers of this friend of their girlhood.

He went home that night with a heavy heart, inclined to murmur against fate, to "kick against the pricks," for indeed it seemed to him that joy was never to enter into his life. All his years had been sad and bitter since he attained the mature age of ten, when he stood beside his mother's dead form and tearless sobs lifted his throat—for she was most dear, and she was gone.

Then followed the days of alternate harshness and over-indulgence, which had marked his father's manner towards him.

Afterwards he went to Rugby, and there he was comparatively happy; then came the first glimpse of university life, the pleasant companionship of congenial spirits, the rest and quiet of the grey old town—the sudden withdrawal from it, all on account of his father's unexpected death.

Then the years of toil, unsweetened by love, lightened ever so little by the frank sympathy of the Julians.

And now, when at last prosperity smiled upon him, the woman before whom he had cast his treasures would have none of it. What wonder that he rebelled bitterly against his lot.

The next morning rose fair and bright; the previous rain had but beautified the earth and filled the air with heavy, sweet odours.

In the garden Kathie was singing an old song with a litting measure; Hope, leaning from her window, thought what a great pity it was she could not always wear her hair loose; it was brown, wavy, and there was an abundance of it. With it blown loose about her face and shoulders the girl looked almost pretty.

Her eyes were soft and dewy, and the smile which displayed her white teeth, was pleasant to see.

"Make haste to come down," she cried, "the morning is perfection, and the dew is not yet off the grass. Put on a pair of stout shoes and we will go down by the line to Ives Meadow; I want some rushes for my basket, we shall get them there, yellow lilies, too; if you want white you must go further afield."

"Why did you not call me before? What a sluggard I am! But, wait, I will be with you almost directly," and she made haste to complete her toilet.

It was glorious down by the river, and the girls loitered so long that at The Larches breakfast was ended before their return, a fresh supply of coffee and eggs being brought in to them.

"It was really too bad of us," said Kathie, when she had satisfied a very healthy appetite; "we ought not to have stayed so long, but it was so deliciously cool. Hope, we have had the cream of the day, Violet must be content with skimmed milk. Oh, how lazy I feel, and how tired! When I have made myself presentable, we will go out upon the lawn; we may catch a faint breeze—"

"Oh! I don't lay that flattering unction to your soul," laughed E-perance, "it is going to be a breathlessly hot day; but we shall find a little shelter under your ancient limes—why don't you call this place The Limes? there isn't a larch near for

miles, but you have two of the finest limes I have ever seen."

"My dear child," answered Violet with an air of superior wisdom, "did you ever know a house that deserved its name? Take, for instance, Gabriel's place—there isn't a pool within a radius of six miles; Mrs. Wren lives at The Cedars, and you could not find a cedar in Rosemount though your life depended upon it. The Laurels boasts nothing but sunflowers and two weedy rhododendrons—and so on—"

"Hush," cried Kathie, "what is that? A runaway if I am myself," and she ran out upon the lawn, the other girls following. What they saw was a great roan mare coming at terrific pace; the rider, a soldierly-looking man was doing his utmost to reduce the animal to order, his teeth were set hard upon the nether lip, and his eyes were angry.

The next moment, Violet shrieked aloud; with a sickening thud the man fell to the ground, and the riderless horse madly pursued its way.

CHAPTER III.

"I don't know how to thank you sufficiently!" said the invalid, lifting a pair of wonderful violet eyes to Mrs. Julian's. "You have been a good Samaritan, indeed; and it must have been a beastly bore to have a sick stranger foisted upon you; I am horribly ashamed of myself for causing such a bother."

The lady smiled.

"Oh, you have merely given us something to do; and, as Rosemount is very dull, as a rule, we regard you almost as a benefactor. I confess we were a little frightened when you lay unconscious for a day and a night. After that—well, I took an interest in you; and, really, you are not a troublesome patient. If you are very good you may go down to-morrow; and, to-day, I will wheel you up to the window; you will see the market-car passing, and my girls below playing tennis; and so there will be plenty of amusement."

He smiled as though he thought her idea of amusement primitive, indeed; then, with his handsome chestnut head thrown back upon his cushions, he said,—

"What has become of the mare? You have told me nothing of her!"

"She fell over Craigs Cliff, and was so much injured she had to be shot. I am so sorry."

"I am not," and the violet eyes grew suddenly hard. "If they had let her live, I would have given her her quietus myself; the brute was always struggling for the mastery. Until she threw me I dared have sworn I was any animal's master; and a pretty legacy she left me—bruises innumerable, and a broken arm." Then, catching sight of the lady's face, he went on, quickly, "I am naturally chagrined that I should have disturbed the quiet of your life, and upset all your household arrangements."

"Forget those things," answered Mrs. Julian, rather coldly. Somehow the look in those violet eyes, the words he had uttered, and the tone in which they were uttered, had chilled her interest in the stranger within her gates.

She wheeled his chair to the window. On the lawn were the three girls; he had seen Violet and Kathie often, because usually they brought all that he needed to the door; but E-perance was wholly strange to him, so that he exclaimed,—

"Heavens! what a lovely girl! Mrs. Julian, you must be forgiven if you see no beauty in any other when she is near."

Her face shadowed. She loved her own good girls so dearly, it was hard to see them so often passed by for others; but she said, without a touch of rancour in her voice or heart,—

"That is not my daughter, but a distant cousin, who, being orphaned, has made her home with us. Yes, she is very beautiful, and as good as she is lovely."

"She ought to have a lovely name," mused Major Clare aloud.

"Well, I think she has; we call her Hope; but she was christened E-perance."

She went away then, and the soldier sat

watching the three girls who had ceased to play. E-perance was reclining in a low rocking chair, and, evidently narrating some merry story, for her listeners laughed immoderately; she herself indulged, from time to time in a gay little smile, and Aylmer Clare would have given a great deal to hear what it was she said; but only the faint echo of her liquid notes reached him, and he was afraid to move lest he should discover himself and frighten the beauty away.

Very impatiently he waited for the morrow, when Mrs. Julian, being satisfied with his condition, permitted him to go down for an hour or two in the evening.

He had dinner served in his own room at six; at seven his hostess conveyed him to the drawing-room, and, having made him comfortable upon a couch, summoned the girls from the garden to amuse him.

When she introduced E-perance he lifted his eyes suddenly to hers, they were full of admiration, and, to her intense annoyance, she flushed rosy red. The Major smiled in an almost self-satisfied way.

He spoke a few brief, courteous words, and then devoted himself to his hostess's daughters, but not one look or movement of Hope's escaped him. He had all an artist's love of beauty and colouring, so she pleased that side of his nature. She had a sweet voice, and she sang pathetic little ballads in a way which showed both training and feeling. He, himself, was no mean musician, so this was another link between them.

He was undoubtedly accomplished, and one of the handsomest men of his set. His features were of an aquiline type, his eyes deep violet, and capable of expressing more—very much more—than at times he guessed. The mouth, beneath the heavy chestnut moustache, was firm and a trifle full; the brow was broad and low, white as a woman's, when contrasted with the short waves of chestnut hair.

As Gabriel entered, a faint, vague thrill of fear filled his heart lest this man should win from him his beloved. He was so gay and *debonair*, his sickness had only invested him with an added charm, and already he was on an easy footing with E-perance.

"My good nurse," he was saying, "refuses to allow me any exercise, any exertion; but, in a day or two, when she is more placable, we will try over those new songs of which you have been telling me."

"Gabriel and Hope are our musicians," said Kathie in a little lull of the conversation. Neither Violet nor I do more than play."

"And," said Gabriel, "I am but an indifferent performer; Miss Morton is very good to tolerate me. Perhaps she does it on the principle that any performer is better than none." And, although the girl protested, it was more from courtesy than truth. Gabriel had a pleasant voice, but it was not strong, and its compass was small.

Major Aylmer Clare made rapid strides towards recovery; in a few days he was able to walk with the girls in the grounds, to drive with them into the village, and although his arm was painful at times he had very little else of which to complain. When he could get downstairs he had faintly protested he must leave The Larches, he could not intrude longer, or outstay his welcome; and then, in her motherliness, Mrs. Julian had bidden him remain until his recovery was quite an accepted and established fact. He had confided to her that he had no relatives, and was home from India on a six months' furlough; adding, with a pathetic look in his eyes,—

"After all, when a man has no friends he is a fool to return to old scenes, he feels his loneliness the more. I hardly care to think of the day on which we must part! your goodness will only make matters worse."

Now he was on the friendliest footing with all in the little household, except apparently E-perance, who seemed rather to avoid him. Still, when they were all gathered together in the evening she would yield to Kathie's entreaties, and join her voice with his. He had a magnificent tenor; and nothing gave the ladies greater pleasure than to listen to him, singing

"Ruby," "The Distant Shore," and a host of other songs of like character.

The days passed by with almost lightning rapidity, and although both Violet and Kathie guessed how matters would end for the Major and Esperance, neither spoke one word to her on the subject. It was not one for railery, however playful, and then there was Gabriel to consider. But Aylmer's voice took a tenderer tone when he addressed their beautiful friend, and there was a look in his eyes as they rested upon her that told its own story. He was a man of sudden and fervent passions: and in far less than three weeks he was her slave, her most ardent lover, she could do with him what she would—to her he had given the best part of himself, and he would love her until death.

What she felt she dared not think, until one night near the end of August—he had been singing to them, accompanying himself, and his eyes were lifted to hers as she stood white-gowned and slender by an open window—the song he had chosen was "My Queen," and he saw her face flush and whiten, her eyelids quiver and fall, to veil the light and the confusion in the sweet, grey eyes. She could not possibly misunderstand his meaning; she was not angry, or her mouth had been less tremulous—his heart beat fast and thick—hope was almost certainty—he did not know how he ended the ballad; he hardly guessed what there was in his voice as he joined her, which compelled obedience to his wishes.

"Come out with me," was all he said, and the words sounded hoarse and laboured. Without replying, she stepped through the French window and he followed. She was trembling very much; he could hear how fast her breath came, could see the milk-white throat lifted by agitation—and then—well, tacit—he forgot the scene he had so often rehearsed to himself, he forgot to be eloquent, or to attempt any nicety of speech—he turned and catching her close to his breast, cried,—

"Hope! Hope! my darling, my darling! I do anything with me, but send me away—you had better kill me than say no."

Breathless, wordless, she lay a moment, her fair face upturned, her eyes looking into his, whilst his arm constrained her—then she said,—

"I could not send you away if I would, for you are the very life of my life."

Close by a nightingale was singing, filling the odorous night air with mad melody; above them was the clear sky with its saffron and purple clouds, its rosy flecks, and far away to the west the deep blue faded to palest, tenderest green—one great bright star shone down upon their betrothal, and just beyond the purple cloud, a little, feathery moon was rising. So long as they lived, each would remember this night, with its sweet scents and sights, and one at least would never forget the voice of a passing choir lad, who sang as he walked,—

"Oh, love for a week, a year, a day,
But alas, for the love which loves away."

"My dearest heart," whispered Aylmer, when something of his ordinary composure had returned to him, "it must be my endeavour to grow worthy of you; I never felt my imperfections so keenly until I loved you."

Now, as Major Clare had a "very comfortable opinion of himself," and was not at all prone to undervalue his own virtues, this was the greatest compliment he could have paid Esperance, but she would not accept it. He was her hero, her king, and with all the fervour of first love, she worshipped and idealised him—so little she knew of men's hearts she judged them by her own, and what greater mistake could she make. She did not even stay to think, if like herself he had given the full harvest of affection; she loved him, and he was her very own, on all the fair earth no girl was so glad as she.

Out on the road one man watching saw those tender embraces, the sweet, uplifted face on which was the radiance of a great and holy love, and felt that for him hope was not. His heart failed him and his strength was slipping from him as he hurried homewards, saying yearningly, bitterly,—

"I, too, love her—and oh, Heaven! he has won her; of what use are life or wealth to me now?"

CHAPTER IV.

DULY the engagement was announced, and the man who loved her better than life itself offered his congratulations.

There was no sign or hint of pain in his voice or manner. He was more frank and friendly than ever Esperance had known him, so that had she possessed any petty vanity she might have been piqued. But there was nothing small in the girl's nature. She was perhaps a little spoiled by so much admiration and flattery, but she was morally proud and pure. She was generous to a fault, and the clear mind was wedded to a warm heart.

So she accepted Gabriel's kindly wishes with gratitude. She was intensely glad to find that his fancy for her had been only a passing one, and she gave herself up wholly to the rapture of loving and being loved.

Major Clare had applied for an extension of leave on a date previous to their engagement, and was so fortunate as to obtain it.

He was not to return until the May of the ensuing year, which gave him three months' grace, and in March he and Esperance were to be married.

He had wished to fix the ceremony at a much earlier date, but Mrs. Julian had wisely said,—

"You know so little of each other it is absolutely necessary you should know more before entering the married state—remember this is not a thing to be lightly undertaken—it is a life-long agreement, and Esperance has only me to study her welfare."

With that Aylmer Clare was compelled to be content. He made handsome settlements upon the bride elect, for he was a man of substance. He was the most devoted, most ardent of lovers, so that Esperance thought herself the luckiest girl on earth.

In September they all went to Scarborough, Kathie begging Gabriel to join them; but he shook his head, saying, "No, dear, they are happiest when I am away."

"Poor dear Gay!" the girl said softly, placing a little kindly hand upon his arm, "I know how it is with you and I am grieved. But better days must be in store for you—you have suffered so long, and Heaven is kind—don't you think that your joys may one day outweigh your grief. And even if you do not get your reward here—"

"I shall above. Oh, Kathie, my dear, you really must not take that tone with me," he retorted with a bitter laugh, "Heaven is so dim, so far away, and I am not so old yet that I do not long to grasp my happiness on earth."

Poor little Kathie, with her large heart and small wisdom! She had nothing left to say, but she thought of Gabriel often in those *dolce far niente* days they spent by the sea.

Then other things came to fill her mind and occupy her thoughts, so that Gabriel was not always there in spirit to sadden her with his sad looks.

Violet had a lover!

Kathie was as delighted as though the luck had fallen to her share, and Mrs. Julian had never before been so proud.

Violet's lover was a clergyman—a chaplain in the cause of the seamen—a big, dark, handsome fellow, who did not sink the man in the minister, and almost everybody wondered "what he saw in plain Violet Julian to love her."

She herself was astonished, grateful, and above all most happy; and it was with a trustful heart that one morning early in November she gave herself to the keeping of Reginald Rochmont, at the church of St. Martin's.

The family had lingered at Scarborough until the ceremony could be completed, and then had returned to Rosemount, where the loss of Violet was most keenly felt by the poor folks; and, indeed, she had left a gap in the household none could fill so well.

Until she went to a home of her own nobody quite understood her worth until she was gone.

The many little duties she performed so well and so quickly making no stir about them. Reginald Rochmont was wise when he chose the homely casket, for it held a heart of gold.

The Major never seemed to find life dull at Rosemount, although he had always been accustomed to great cities, and much pleasure. He had hired a little place just beyond the village, where he established himself with a couple of servants—man and wife—and every day he drove over to The Larches, his love for Esperance increasing with each interview.

He had presented her with a beautiful horse, having learned that she was a clever equestrian, and together they rode to the meets or took long canter across country, and in her passionate happiness the girl never dreamed a cloud could cross her sky, or any chance chill the deep love in her heart. She had not yet learned to think,—

"You had better be drowned than love and dream."

She was living in a glorious world where it was summer, and she would be always young; but in the time that was to follow she would bitterly confess, "If you live you must love, if you love, regret;" and the knowledge which led up to that confession would almost break her heart.

Christmas came and went, January slipped by in a quick of pleasures. Violet and her husband had spent the first part of the month at Rosemount; but now they had returned to Scarborough, and a change had occurred in the weather.

The clear frost was gone, fogs and rains were daily institutions, the whole country wore a most desolate appearance, so that when Major Clare suggested they should spend a week in town Mrs. Julian and the girls eagerly caught at the suggestion.

There were many articles, too, which Esperance wished to purchase and could not obtain of the local tradesmen. Then the idea of a week of "real society" was pleasant.

Gabriel had gone to London on business of importance, which would detain him for some length of time, so to him Mrs. Julian wrote begging he would secure suitable apartments for them, and amongst the first birds of passage they went to town.

Three or four days passed in sight-seeing; Esperance and the Major were capital guides, knowing just the places and things which would most amuse their companions, and where to find them. On the fifth night they went to the Lyceum. Never in all the years which followed, and many of them were happy ones—would Esperance forget that night. She had sat with fast clasped hands and lovely, serious eyes, listening to the attention-compelling tones of Irving and Terry; she had breathlessly followed every move of the play, unconscious of everything else, of the admiration her beauty was exciting, or Kathie's little choking sobs; now like one in a dream she walked beside Aylmer to their carriage. She had never been so beautiful, never so happy; she leaned back in her seat with closed eyes, and when under cover of the darkness her lover possessed himself of her hand, she contented herself by merely returning its pressure gently.

"What, not one word to say?" he cried gaily, "Have not you enjoyed to-night?"

"So well, that if you please I would like to be quiet. I am very selfish, as you will soon discover, and I want to taste my enjoyment over and over again. I don't intend to speak again until we reach home."

Kathie laughed,—

"When Hope uses that resolute tone all entreaties are in vain; you will have to decide upon mamma for amusement."

"And mamma is feeling rather more stupid than usual," laughed Mrs. Julian, "she is unaccustomed to late hours and so much gaiety."

"Then silence shall be the order of the day," responded Aylmer, well content to sit beside his sweetheart and keep possession of that gentle hand.

Presently they reached home; as they alighted a man came down the steps—it was Gabriel Westwood, and he looked tired and harassed.

"You, Gabriel!" exclaimed Mrs. Julian, "pray don't run away."

"Oh, it is very late, and I ought to apologise for such an untimely visit, but a parcel came for me from Rosemount, and it contained a letter for you from Mrs. Bentham; she did not know your address and begged I would forward it. The servant told me you were out, so I did not stay."

"But we have returned," laughed Kathie, "don't be mean; why should your new friends monopolise you wholly—come in, Gay."

They were standing in a group upon the pavement; one or two people passed them, glancing half curiously, half carelessly at them; then a woman darted forward, and with her hand upon Major Clare's arm said, sobbingly,—

"A penny, sir, for Heaven's sake, to save me from starving."

There was desperation in her voice, desperation in her dark eyes, all too large for the poor, small, painted face. Clare shook off her hand, and turned a cold look upon her; then his own cheek grew pale, a hard light came into his eyes, as he said,—

"I have nothing for you," and catching his *fiancée's* hand, sought to draw her away. But the anguish in the woman's voice, the hungry look in her eyes had touched the girl's heart.

"Stay," she said, swiftly, "she must not be sent away like that, poor soul." Her clear notes trembled. "Mr. Westwood, I have not my purse with me; will you be my banker until the morning?"

He gave her most of the loose cash upon him, all the while regarding Aylmer Clare with a keen enquiring glance. The Major kept his face steadily averted, as he said in his coldest tones,—

"Esperance, how easily you are imposed upon, come in. I will not permit you to exchange speech with that woman, it is unfit that you should approach one of her class."

The hall door suddenly opened, the light fell full upon the handsome face—then an awful cry broke the momentary silence.

"Great Heaven—Aylmer Clare!" and dashing the money aside, the unhappy woman fled. Then in great discomfort they all went inside; there Esperance, very white and stern, asked,—

"Who was she? How did she know you?" and the clear eyes went up to meet her lover's. He was as pale as she, and scarcely less composed.

"The story is not fit for you to hear, Esperance," he said, "do not insist upon an answer."

"But I do insist," proudly, "and I am not exceeding my rights."

"Very well, although it is altogether a nauseous subject. That woman was the wife of an officer I knew intimately, and she left him for the sake of another man. By her appearance, you can guess to what depths she has fallen. Please say no more upon the subject; it is unpleasant to me."

"Forgive me," she said very gently. "I was wrong to force this story from you; I ought to have trusted you more fully—but—I was startled."

"Say no more about it," he returned, in an offended tone; but Mrs. Julian's eyes were troubled as they met Gabriel's, and such an air of constraint pervaded the little assembly, that he soon took his leave. As he stepped into the square a dark figure issued from a doorway and followed him for several yards, then a faint voice said,—

"Will you please let me speak with you?"

CHAPTER V.

VEERING quickly round, he saw once more the woman who had behaved so curiously. She was very small and slight, and, once, she must have been exceedingly pretty. The face was a pure oval, the mouth infantile in form and expression, but in the dark eyes lay all the despair and sorrow of a lost soul. That she was of gentle birth was evident, but this only inclined Gabriel to regard her more sternly, remembering Clare's story; and yet, fallen, degraded as she was, she was still a woman—young, desperate, alone—so that he did not drive her away, but asked, coldly,—

"What is it that you want?"

"Just to speak with you—no more. I can trust you. Heaven help me! I have learned all too late to distinguish between the evil and the good. For the sake of that beautiful and kind girl who leant upon his arm, will you tell me what she is to Major Clare?"

Gabriel hesitated a moment. It seemed a sin to him even to speak of Esperance to this lost creature; but her pathetic eyes constrained him—the marks of tears, which had left a crooked track upon her painted cheeks, touched him to pity.

"The lady is Major Clare's promised wife."

In her eagerness, she caught his hand.

"But she must not marry him; oh, she must not! If you are her friend—if you value her happiness—you will move heaven and earth to prevent such an unholy alliance!"

"What do you mean?" he asked, sternly.

"You must speak plainly now."

"I mean, that by every vow man can utter, by every solemn promise given under Heaven, I—and I only—should be his wife!"

"You?"

"Yes. It seems strange when you look at me now. Three years ago I was the wife of a man who loved me; whose shoestring I was not worthy to tie. I left him for Aylmer Clare; and what I am now he has made me! Go to that girl and tell her this. Tell her, too, he is merciless as a tiger! that when he has won her his charm will be gone—he will be weary of her."

"You forget," broke in Gabriel, very coldly, "that your cases are not parallel; this lady will be his wife. There is no sin in the love she gives him."

The woman winced.

"You strike hard," she said, "and I deserve it; but there are others beside myself who have suffered to make his pleasure. Well, I have warned you. I can say no more, unless it is this, that if Aylmer Clare knelt before me, praying me to be his wife—and that is so likely, isn't it?—I would refuse him. Fallen, degraded, fouled beyond all cleansing, I yet hold myself too good a woman to bear his name."

She was turning to go, when Gabriel caught her gently but firmly by the shoulder.

"You must give me your name, as a guarantee of good faith."

"My name? I forfeited it long ago! Call me anything you please. Only confront me with him and you will see if I speak the truth or no—unless, indeed, he frighten me into silence by his cruelty. I saw him once kill a dog by inches because it had bitten him. For all his smooth ways he has a cruel heart. But you—you will tell her all I say. Do not let another woman suffer as I have done."

"I can tell her nothing; I am utterly powerless to help her."

"But you would if you could. What prevents you?"

"I, too, love her," he answered, shamefacedly. "Any word of warning from me would be worse than idle."

"Leave it to me; although—Heaven help me!—I scarcely see what I can do. But, if the worst comes, I will summon the man I wronged to my side, and he shall do the rest. He is just and honourable, and, although with all his heart he loathes me, he will save another woman from the cruellest fate which can threaten her; that is if she will hear and be persuaded. Good night! remember my words."

"You must at least give me your address, and take with you all that I have remaining upon me" (tendering a few loose coins). "To-morrow I will see what can be done for you, if you are wishful to live down your past."

"Can you doubt it?" she cried, with a heart-breaking burst of tears. "Do I look as though I had found the wages of sin easy? Only try me; I don't care what the work is, or how hard I toil—"

She could say no more, and the dark eyes bent upon her were very pitiful. To himself, Gabriel thought, "Work is over for you; presently you will be at rest, and for ever."

"You may trust me," was what he said to her.

"I shall not fail you."

The dark, tearful eyes met his in closest scrutiny; what she saw evidently satisfied her for she said,—

"I am Milly, and my address is 7, Angel's Court, Holborn Viaduct."

"Very well; I shall see you to-morrow. Remember, that I trust you not to avoid me, because by so doing you will prevent justice to—her."

"I shall not avoid you; and, with all my heart, I thank you for your generosity—most of all for your sympathy. I am going back to my room now; but for you, my bed to-night must have been the river or some dark archway—and I was delicately nurtured!"

She looked as though she would fain have said more, but, with a sigh, she turned away, flitting—a dark shadow—through the dark streets, and Gabriel went to his hotel in a miserable frame of mind.

Who and what was this woman? Were her wild words concerning Aylmer Clare really true? If so, what was his duty to Esperance? If he went to her and told his story would she believe him? Would not she, in common with the Julians, call it a base conspiracy, given birth to snatch her from the man she loved to cast her into the arms of the man who loved her? "Heaven help me!" he cried, "I am bound hand and foot. Hope! Hope, my darling! what is there I can do for you?"

He could not sleep that night, but tossed restlessly to and fro until his usual hour for rising came; then he ate a very spare breakfast, dawdled away half the morning over the papers, and, finally taking up his hat, started to visit "Milly."

He found Angel's Court a great libel upon its name; it was a *cul-de-sac* of an unsavoury kind; on the pavement dirty, half naked children were playing, or picking up the garbage left about; the women stood at the doors, arms akimbo, screaming to each other the latest scandal, or the "old man's last exploit."

They looked very curiously at him as he passed down their midst; no respectable people visited Angel's Court with the exception of the missionary class, and Gabriel was at once dubbed a "Methody."

Quite a little crowd gathered about him as he halted at number Seven inquiring for Milly.

A dreadful looking woman, with red hair and purple face, said "Oh ay, that's my third floor lodger; you'll find her in her room, there ain't no mistake about it, so you can go up. It's a wonder you find her here, 'cause only yesterday I give her notice to quit, 'cause why she hadn't paid no rent for a week, an' I'm only a *poor* woman what can't afford to gie any credit—" but before she had ended her speech Gabriel had climbed the dirty, narrow stairs, and was tapping at a door which was absolutely guiltless of paint.

A weak voice said "come in," and obeying he entered.

On a broken-down horse-hair couch (the room contained no bed), lay Milly; her face was pale and hollow, her eyes were sunken, but about the low broad brow were little infantile curls; and a whole mass of short tendrils clustered about the nape of the white, thin throat.

She could not have been more than twenty-one—Hope's age—the man's heart ached for this poor soiled dove, this woman fallen from her angel sphere.

The hot blood mounted into her wan cheeks as he entered, "I did not think that you would remember," she said under her breath, and began to cry feebly.

He waited for her to grow quieter, then he said "Can you listen to me? Will you tell me where I may find your friends, surely they will help you—"

"No, no, no!" she cried with sudden energy, "I am worse than dead to them; they hate my very name. Oh, be good to me—indeed you have been more so than I deserve—get me into some home where I may hide my sin and my sorrow—there are such places—I used to believe they existed only in fancy, but I am wiser now—infinately wiser—I have trodden the broad way and I have met destruction."

All the while she was twisting her thin fingers in an agony of shame and contrition Gabriel's eyes were taking in every detail of the miserable

room. It had a "lean-to" ceiling; he remembered with a shudder that in such an awful parody of a home Chatterton had died a suicide's death; he did not think Milly had courage enough to cut the Gordian knot as he had done, but he was afraid of what might happen to her if she remained longer alone, and in such vile surroundings.

Beside the couch, the room contained a broken table, two chairs, a glass bottle which did duty for a candlestick; and there was a cupboard, minus a door, in which stood a cup and saucer of different patterns, a tumbler, the remains of a little loaf, and a tiny piece of butter in paper.

"What have you eaten to-day?" he asked, gruffly; and she answered feebly, "I wanted nothing; I was only too glad to rest by this bit of a fire—I am not very strong now, but I shall be better soon. Oh, for Heaven's sake, take me away from here; I am a wicked woman but there is forgiveness even for me—only, *here I dare not pray for it.*"

He quieted her; then with a few kind words went away to procure necessities and to bring back a doctor; for he felt convinced Milly was exceedingly ill.

She lay with closed eyes and folded hands waiting for his return, and when he came, bringing with him Doctor Kelso, she uttered a loud cry, and throwing up her hands hid her face in them.

The medical man crossed swiftly to her side; and with gentle force unveiled that shamed countenance, then, in all sadness said, *Milly—Mrs. Bryce.*

"Don't, oh don't; I cannot bear your reproaches although I deserve them; go away, oh go away, and leave me here to die."

He motioned Gabriel to leave them, then said, authoritatively, "Lie still; be quiet. You must not speak until I give you permission; Mr. Westwood has told me something—I guess more," and then he proceeded to examine the weak chest, to make careful and minute observations.

When he had finished he covered her carefully with the clothes before he asked, "Oh, Milly! Milly! how could you do it?"

She broke into bitterest tears; "I cannot tell you now, I—I am tied—and oh! I did pray that I might never see the old familiar faces any more—to-morrow, if I can I will tell you all, because there is some one to be saved, some one whose happiness is all in all to my benefactor—and now answer me truly—*shall I live or die?*"

"What is your wish?" he said, all the harshness gone from his voice.

"Can you ask I want death—only the grave can cover my iniquities."

Then he took her hot feverish hands in his; he forgot all except the fact that he had known her, a young, pretty, innocent child, the dearest friend of his own dear daughter, and his voice was solemn as he said, "My poor girl, you have very few days to live; if there is any wrong you can right, any reparation you can make, do not delay."

"Thank you, doctor; you have brought me glad tidings," and she spoke no more then.

CHAPTER VI.

MRS. JULIAN with her little party had returned to Rosemount, Gabriel however remained in town, to Major Clare's satisfaction; for since the night when Milly had accosted him he had felt vaguely there was trouble in the air, and that Gabriel was suspicious of his integrity. Esperance had no doubt of her lover, but privately Mrs. Julian and Kathie were not satisfied with his explanation, especially when they saw how coldly, "Dear old Gabriel" had met his advances.

It was a fortnight since his first visit to Angel's Court, and by Dr. Kelso's permission Milly had been moved into a more decent neighbourhood. It was evident to all that she was dying fast; she herself knew it, and spent long hours praying for pardon and peace. Her only visitors were the doctor and Gabriel, and of her past she never spoke until one dusky evening, when perhaps she felt the end was nearer than they guessed.

"It is time that you knew all, dear friend," she said to Gabriel, "because, if you cannot save

her, there is one who can—I mean my husband, and it is of him I would speak. Until now, I have kept his name a secret from you, but with death so near, I feel that I would give the whole world, were it mine, just to hear his grave voice, saying, 'I forgive you, Milly,' I dare not hope that this will ever happen, but at least I feel, if he goes to her, tells her all, as I tell it you, she will turn with loathing from one who is unworthy her. It is not out of revenge I do this—I am a dying woman, a guilty woman—I would save her from misery, just as a poor expiation of my crime. Mr. Westwood, my true name is Milly Bryce, and I am the wife of Colonel Alexander Bryce, who has served his country with distinction. He is in London now; you will bring him to me—"

"If he will come, yes. Now finish your story."

"Perhaps you did not know my mother, Lady Shaw. She was very pretty, and her heart was like ice to me; she was so young, I do not think she liked to have a daughter so old and big as I—they tell me she is going to marry again, and she looks younger than I. I don't remember my father, he died when I was a mere baby, and then mother sent me to school to be 'out of the way.' I did not see her again until I was sixteen, when she took me to Boulogne where we met Colonel Bryce.

"He was a man almost forty, I a mere child; but he fell in love with me and mother was delighted. She encouraged him in every possible way, and before we left the place we were engaged; a month later we were married, and left Portsmouth for Bombay. I was quite proud of my new dignity, the Colonel was very good to me, and of love I was wholly ignorant.

"I trod life's measure with the thoughtlessness of a child; I never stayed to think if I loved him or not. I did not know love's name, and my mother was delighted to have 'got me off hand' so soon. We went up the country to Ahmednagar, and there I met Major Clare. I was then just seventeen, impressionable, weak—oh, I need not tell you what followed. I left my home, my husband for him—I travelled with him from station to station, an outcast, a pariah. I questioned him once about my husband, but he bade me never to speak his name again, and I, having learned already to fear him, obeyed for awhile. Colonel Bryce did not seek the redress the law would have given him, he was too proud to make his wrongs public; but when a year had gone by, and I begged Aylmer if possible to make me his lawful wife, he laughed in a dreadful fashion saying—

"To do that Bryce must get a divorce. I don't think he will go so far, and, on my part, I confess I could not lose caste by marrying a divorcee. You knew what your lot would be when you consented to leave Bryce; you have only yourself to blame."

"I felt the life slipping, slowly from me," Do you mean, I asked, "that your love is dead? That I am no longer worthy it—will you tell me that you have grown weary of me; you who protested to love me so truly?" He smiled in the same cold, cruel way—

"My dear girl, you know how such unions as ours end, and you are too exigent. Of course, each has grown weary of the other; take my advice and hold out the olive branch to Bryce. In my anger I lifted my hand and struck him."

"Without a word he left me, and I lay all night in agony wondering what I must do, where I could hide my guilty head. In the morning I found it was all decided for me; unknown to me Aylmer had been ordered further up country, and before I left my room he had started, leaving a note behind—the cruellest note that ever was penned.

"After that I was ill a long while, and when I recovered, I found I had been robbed of all my valuables, and even my wardrobe by the natives, but an old sailor came to my rescue, and through his kindness, I returned to England, making my way to my mother's home. She refused to see me; she drove me from her door with threats of the police; and of all I had known, none would give me a helping hand. Better for me that I had died then; but I lived—to sink ever lower

and lower—until sometimes I hardly wished for the old self back again—and now—now—when—I am—dying," her voice failed utterly then; when he lifted her in his strong arms Gabriel saw that she had swooned.

Black hate was in his heart against Clare, and a great pity for this unhappy creature, whose life had been marred in its earliest dawn.

All night he sat brooding over the terrible story he had heard, and wondering what he could do in the matter; if only he did not love Esperance things would have been so much easier, and his way would have been quite plain. But even the Julians would think he was a prejudiced party, and give very little credence to his tale, especially as he could bring forward no witnesses. He remembered now that some one had once said in his hearing that Colonel Bryce was in England, but he was alone; there had been a rupture between himself and his wife, some dreadful scandal, and the wife had disappeared. But no one dared question him about her; and another had added—

"Well, when men of forty marry girls of sixteen, they must accept the consequences."

Now he held the two ends of this tangled skein in his hands—what should he do? At any cost Esperance must be saved from what was certain misery; the only thing to be done was to go to the Colonel and ask for assistance; yet he dreaded opening the old wound, and he was heart sick with the thought of the sorrow awaiting the woman he so loved. She would, perhaps, hate him for inflicting such pain upon her—he would be further off than ever from winning her. Well, was not her welfare more to him than all beside? He would acquaint Bryce with his wife's story and act on his advice. Early in the morning he went to the Colonel's hotel; Milly had long ago learned, where her husband resided; many and many a night she had lingered outside, wishing to see him, just to know she had not changed him so very much; longing to hear the sound of the kindly voice, to whose affection she had been so deaf—but she had never chanced to drop upon him.

The Colonel was at breakfast, but he instantly consented to see Gabriel, who found him a tall, military looking man, with a grave face and sad eyes. Both hair and moustache were a little grizzled, but otherwise there was no sign of increasing age upon him.

"I regret to say that I cannot even remember your name," he remarked, with a little courteous inclination of his fine head.

"No, we are utter strangers, but I come as a messenger—from your wife."

Through all its bronze the soldier's face paled—

"Sir, you have been ill-advised—I have no wife—I lost her long ago—and not by death."

"Will you listen to me patiently, even though I re-open old wounds, recall old memories; more depends upon this disclosure than you can guess. There is a young and innocent girl to be saved from Clare's power."

"Ah!" gasped, rather than said the Colonel, "so he was weary of her. I knew he would; it is his way—go on; I will listen to you, but make your story brief. Remember the woman who sent you, was my wife."

Gabriel told the whole narrative as succinctly as he could, leaving nothing out, and the Colonel listened with whitened face and fast clenched hands. But when he touched as lightly as he could upon Milly's further degradation, her misery, her want; her yearning for the pardon she was so far from deserving, his face fell forward upon his arms, and great sobs shook his strong frame. His emotion, of which he was evidently ashamed, lasted but a very short time, then looking up he said—

"I did not think I could be so weak—and it shall not occur again; but—but to think of her—pretty innocent Milly—fallen so low—breaks down one's pride and composure. I daresay you blame me for marrying so mere a child, but she was not comfortable with her mother, who indeed was no fit guardian for a young girl, and she was fond of me. We were very happy until Clare crossed our path, and then there came a gradual change—he is a villain, and a monster—

more than one man has lived to curse the day he opened his doors to him. He corrupted my poor Milly, he took her from me without mercy on her or me. I swore in my anger I would never look on her face again—but, just because I loved her, I could not drag her name through a divorce court, and I hoped that death would soon claim her—for she was never very strong. Take me to her, my friend—she shall not die without the assurance of my full and perfect forgiveness—it is all that I can give her now."

Together they went to Milly's lodgings; she heard their steps upon the stairs, and her heart died within her; the man she had wronged beyond all reparation had answered her call, did he come in anger! Could she bear to look into the kind eyes grown cold and angry! with a man she hid her face in the pillows, and above the beating of her heart she heard him enter alone. There was a moment's pause, then a low, shaken voice, said,—

"I have come, Milly; won't you speak to me?"

She threw out her arms wildly.

"Alec! Alec! forgive me—only say you forgive me—and then leave me to die. I have been a wicked woman; but I have repented in bitter earnest."

He would let her say no more; but lifting her face looked sorrowfully into it; all the babyish dimples were gone; the dewy innocence of youth had flown from the sunken eyes, and death had set his seal upon her.

"You poor girl," he said, with a groan. "You poor girl—with all my heart I forgive you, as I myself hope to be forgiven."

And then her dark head was pillowed upon his breast; his tears were wet upon her dying face.

CHAPTER VII.

In his arms she fell asleep, and he would not move lest he should waken her; the cramped position so long sustained was painful in the extreme; but he bore it with all the fortitude of a soldier and a man.

Late in the afternoon she woke, and he was enabled to rest and take some slight refreshment; then Gabriel came, and whilst they talked in low tones Milly slept again; at nine she roused herself a little, and as her entreating voice "Alec! Alec! do—do not leave me"—the Colonel seated himself beside her and again passed an arm about her.

His manner toward her was that of a fond father whose prodigal child has returned too late for life and joy, but never too late for pardon and pity. Slowly she sank; just on midnight she opened her weary eyes—

"I am going, Alec," she said faintly, "and for your sake I rejoice; you have forgiven me—and I think Heaven has heard my poor prayers—tell mother I wish I had been a better daughter,"—then a little later, "your goodness has been more than I can bear," and this, indeed, was true; the full pardon of the injured husband had hastened the erring wife's end.

She had done nothing to deserve it, she had not even dared to hope for it; and he had given it spontaneously.

Oh! to undo the awful past; it was she who had spoiled his life, betrayed his honour, and he had spoken no word of reproach—his goodness broke her aching heart. With one last effort she ventured to caress his face with her hand.

"Heaven give you joy—Alec!—Alec!—Alec!"—these were her last words, and so crying on his name she passed away.

He whose honourable name she had dishonoured closed her eyes, kissed her cold, irresponsive lips, and murmuring "Heaven be merciful, to you—a better mother had made you a better woman"—turned and left her lying there.

They buried her quietly, unostentatiously; the only followers were Colonel Bryce and Gabriel, for whom the elder man already had a warm regard.

He had written to Lady Shaw, apprising her of his wife's death, and begging that she would come to look once more upon her poor, unhappy child.

Her ladyship had replied briefly "that

by her own acts Milly had cut herself adrift from them all; she had long been dead to her, why should she subject herself to the pain of looking upon the daughter who was her disgrace? Then, too, she was about to marry the Duke of Chelsterley, and it was most undesirable that such a miserable matter should be made known to him. She begged, therefore to be excused, and even went so far as to congratulate the Colonel upon her daughter's death.

Poor Milly! with such a mother, what must her early training have been! the work began by Lady Shaw had doubtless prepared the way for Aylmer Clare's illicit passion—and between them they had ruined that most unhappy child.

Colonel Bryce had been very grave and gentle in manner, from the time of Milly's death until the funeral was over; then all the softness left his voice and eyes as he said,—

"We will go together to Rosemount; I intend to unmask that scoundrel, but you need have nothing to say in the matter; if you wish it I will not even mention your name. My boy, I have read your secret, and your share in his exposure may prejudice Miss Morton still more against you."

"That I cannot help; I am not going to hide behind you," said Gabriel.

So they travelled down to Rosemount together, interviewing Mrs. Julian, who at first refused to believe the dreadful story, and then when doubt was no longer possible, she burst into tears, exclaiming,—

"Oh, my poor Hope! she believes in him so utterly it will kill her. I cannot bring myself to tell her the dreadful truth."

"Then, madam, you must leave it to me," said the Colonel. "If Miss Morton is the good girl I believe her, her scorn and hatred of her lover's sins will help her to forget him, if, with eyes wide open she still elects to marry him, let her folly be upon her own head."

As he spoke Aylmer Clare rode up to the house. Mrs. Julian rang the bell.

"Please send Major Clare to me at once," she said to the servant who responded, and then the trio waited silently for his coming.

Without any suspicion he walked to his doom; his gay voice sounding blithely in the open doorway, but when he saw Mrs. Julian's averted looks, his eyes wandered from her to her nearest companion, and a harsh cry broke from his lips; he knew now how scant was the mercy he might expect.

Colonel Bryce advancing said,—

"I come, sir, from the grave of the woman you ruined and deserted, to save another—pure as she once was pure—from your evil influence. If you have any remorse for the wrong you have inflicted on me, you will make a confession of your part to Miss Morton, and at once leave this place, if you refuse to do this I myself will acquaint her with—"

"Your wife's perfidy," sneered Clare recovering himself; "after all, the world holds her most to blame; she came with me of her own free will; and women are not wont to be harsh towards the men they love—as my bride elect loves me. You must do your worst; I am not afraid," into his eyes had leapt the look that Mrs. Julian had seen when she told him of his mare's death, and his face was dark with hatred as he flashed upon Gabriel.

"I owe all this to you; and you think by a fluke to win her from me—but—curse you! I shall be victor yet!"

"Wait," said Mrs. Julian to him, "this is a matter which admits of no delay. Colonel Bryce, you will please leave the cruel duty of explaining all to Esperance to me. Her answer, whatever that may be, shall be faithfully delivered to you, Major Clare. She is free to act as she chooses."

The Colonel took up his hat.

"You do not ask for satisfaction," answered Clare, "remember I am perfectly willing to give it."

"The satisfaction I ask, you cannot give. Can you restore Milly to life. Can you wash the stain from her name, make her once more the innocent, helpless girl we both knew? Can you give me

back lost love, lost faith? No, sir; and so I leave you to Oze mightier than I. I could not stoop so low as to exchange blows with you."

The next moment Aylmer Clare was alone, for Mrs. Julian had gone up to Esperance. The girl had fastened a cluster of bright-hued anemones at her throat, and was preparing to leave her room, when the elder lady detained her, saying seriously,—

"My dear child, Major Clare is waiting for you, but before you see him it is necessary you should hear what I have to tell. Sit down, I will not long detain you, and remember that to-day lies with you the choice between good and evil. May Heaven help you to a right decision."

Briefly as she could she told the shameful, sorrowful story, and not one word did Esperance utter throughout the narrative; but after the first swift glance at her Mrs. Julian dared not lift her glance to the white-stricken face, the wide grey eyes staring so hopelessly before her, the slender rigid figure with the arms down-dropped, and the white hands cruelly clenched. When she had ended she said,—

"What message shall I take to Major Clare?"

"Say that I will join him soon," answered the hoarse, laboured voice; and then when she was left alone, she flung her arms high above her head, wailing out, "Oh, Heaven, help me! oh, take from me this wild and vain love; teach me to loathe him as I loathe his sin."

In a little while (for she was strong) she had recovered something of her composure, and very slowly she went down to meet her lover.

As she entered, he hastily advancing, tried to take her hands; but she drew back.

"Do not touch me; I could not bear that yet."

"Esperance," he said, eagerly, "do not let the cackle of my enemies turn your heart against me. I acknowledge that I have done wrong, but my faults were those of a man; and I'll swear I never loved any woman but your own dear self—"

She stayed him with a gesture of superb contempt.

"Say no more; you only aggravate your crime. If you did not love that poor lost woman why then did you woo her to her ruin? Oh, I am punished, indeed, for my idolatry. I thought that, like the gods, you could not sin. I believed you honourable, upright, true in thought and deed. To-day, I know that the lover I loved was a creature of imagination. You never can undo the shameful past, you never can blot out your offence. You are not even sorry for it, and so I bid you go!"

"Esperance! Hope! my wife so soon to be! think what you are doing. Will you ruin me body and soul? As Heaven is above us, you are my one love!"

"Oh!" she cried, with quick passion, "do not so perjure yourself. Such men as you use such oaths so lightly. You do not value them a feather-weight; and I will not accept the odium you cast upon me—you, who have ruined others dare not say that I have ruined you. Take back your ring, I will never wear it again; and when you leave my presence remember that should we unhappily meet we are strangers."

He suddenly caught her in his arms, and straining her to his breast, said,—

"I will not leave you thus. Just now you are angry, and perhaps, a little jealous that any other woman ever shared my regard. When you have had time for thought you will repent your hasty action and rec—"

"Never, I could not so far forget myself; and wrenching herself from his embrace, she stood before him fair, pale, and beautiful, but most unbending.

He felt that all pleading was vain then, and he left her presence; but hope was not yet dead in his heart. No woman had ever successfully resisted him, and knowing how deep was his fiancée's nature he hoped that love would drive her back to him.

He was mistaken.

Esperance Morton was not only proud but pure, and his heinous sin struck at the very roots of her love.

Before her lay years of pain and regret, but she did not waver. She could not reverence him,

scarcely she seemed to feel him dear; and so she turned a deaf ear to his entreaties, would not receive the many letters he wrote, and finally, with wrath and anguish in his heart, Aylmer Clare returned to India, never to live down that best and truest passion of his life—never to forget the pure, proud face which once had smiled upon him—always to remember that but for his own evil doings he might have been happy beyond compare. *And that was his punishment.*

Esperance did not fall ill or weakly bewail her lot. She even endured the condolences and questions of friends with Indian stoicism, and only Gabriel guessed how much she had suffered.

Twelve months after Milly's death Kathie was married, and to no less a personage than Colonel Bryce, with whom she sailed to India to settle at a station far remote from Clare's; and like Violet's her future was to be a glad one.

But five years came and went, Esperance was still Esperance Morton, and Gabriel seemed no nearer winning her than ever.

CHAPTER VIII.

At last Mrs. Julian had resolved to make a voyage to India, "just to see Kathie," and, if possible, bring home the eldest child with her. Esperance was delighted at the prospect, but just a wee bit vexed when Gabriel said,—

"Won't you let me make one of the party; ladies should never travel alone!"

Mrs. Julian seized eagerly at the suggestion.

"Oh, that will be delightful! how good of you. I am such a poor traveller, and have not Hope's courage to sustain me."

Honestly, Esperance esteemed him, and had even some friendship for him; and yet, unjustly enough, she rather laid the sorrow of her life to his account.

Long, long ago, her love for Aylmer Clare had died out, which was as it should be; but she could never think of the dead past without a shuddering sigh, and Gabriel was so inextricably mixed with it that, at times, she almost feared to meet him.

The good ship *Crocus* sailed from Portsmouth on the twenty-third of September, with a splendid breeze and a calm sea. Mrs. Julian at once went below, but Esperance remained with Gabriel on deck until the Isle of Wight was passed.

On the twenty-fifth they entered the Bay of Biscay, and as it was a bit squally most of the passengers went below; Esperance and her companion, being both excellent sailors, remained on deck as before.

The next day they passed Portugal, which looked very desolate; and, on the twenty-seventh, they entered the Straits of Gibraltar.

It was now that Esperance began to realise what a vast store of knowledge Gabriel had garnered together, and to discover how interesting a companion he could be.

Hugging close the African coast they reached the Mediterranean, and halted at the first staying place, Malta. They remained there for Sunday, and Esperance found great amusement in watching the fruit vendors, who were not allowed to go on board, but handed up their wares in buckets by the aid of long poles.

On Monday morning they sailed again, and nothing of note occurred for several days. But one night a heavy mist enveloped them; it was so thick that one could scarcely see one's hand upraised, and Esperance, with a smile, said it was so dismal she should go below. Most of the passengers had preceded her, for the night was unpleasant in the extreme. Presently all was quiet, save the lapping of the waves against the vessel, and profound sleep had sealed most eyelids. But in the dead of the night there came an awful shock, followed by heart-rending screams. In an incredibly short time the deck was crowded, and, in their fear, many would have leaped overboard but for the intervention of the captain and his trusty crew. A vessel had collided with them, and, perhaps afraid of death himself, her captain had not waited to see what damage had been done, or to help to rescue his fellow creatures from death.

Calmly the captain of the *Crocus* stood at his post. Their danger, he said, was great, but would be minimised if only the passengers would follow his instructions, and he called on all the men to help him.

All honour to them! he did not call in vain, for they were Englishmen and true!

With lightning rapidity the boats were got ready; there was no time to spare. First the women and children were lowered, but Esperance hung back. It was as though she suddenly recognised Gabriel's strength and tenderness, for she said,—

"Do not bid us leave you! Just your very presence will comfort auntie; and, if we are to die, let us all die together!"

So he urged her no further, and they remained until the last.

Five long days and nights they had drifted helplessly on the ocean, at the mercy of wind and waves. Fortunately the weather so far had been favourable; but, on the sixth morning, a strong gale was blowing, and every moment the waves threatened to swamp the boat. Their provisions, too, were giving out, and there seemed only a choice of death before them—drowning or starvation.

They caught no glimpse of their late companions, and not even a distant sail appeared to revive their drooping hopes.

One man had succumbed. Mrs. Julian lay prone and exhausted in the boat; and, although the captain and Gabriel did all in their power for their comfort, both she and Esperance suffered intolerably. But the latter was both physically and mentally stronger, and endured all with astonishing fortitude and patience.

In these days it was she learned to know Gabriel, the strength and sweetness of his quiet, heroic nature; and the beauty of a mind she had never yet understood, and in his companionship lay her support.

"It will soon be ended for us," she said, as he sat holding her hand in his; "better death by drowning than to starve and go mad. Poor Kathie! how terribly she will fret. And, oh! how I wish that I had never agreed to this trip, because then she need not have lost her mother; and you would have lived to do great things!"

"You must not reproach yourself for what is certainly not your fault," he answered. "And do not you believe, Esperance, that I would rather die with you, than live without you? And, then, I am not quite hopeless of rescue; many folks have come safely out of greater distress than ours."

"I will take heart of hope from your words," she said with a wan smile; "but, oh, Gabriel, if help does not come soon, she (with a glance at Mrs. Julian) will die. And it is as though an icy hand gripped my heart when I think of what her burial would be. All day long a shark has been following in our wake. Gabriel, it is too cruel!" and her face fell forward.

He drew it down upon his breast, caressing the sunny hair with gentle touch.

"Hope, do not break down now. Your courage has sustained us all in our trial; your despair will be infectious."

She struggled with herself a moment, saying, "Let me be still!" and he spoke no other word. Presently she, looking up, smiled through her tears,—

"I shall not be weak again; and you must forgive me for my folly."

The tender pressure of his hand was sufficient answer.

The next day dragged out its weary hours; the gale had subsided—from the elements nothing was to be feared. But the provisions were exhausted, and not a drop of water remained. Then one or two men became light-headed, and babbled of home, of green fields and bubbling brooks.

Mrs. Julian had not moved, only an occasional moan testified to the life yet within her. Hope's weary head had drooped upon Gabriel's shoulder, and she seemed to sleep.

Evening was approaching, beautiful, serene; but these poor souls had no care for nature's loveliness. The captain's eyes despairingly scanned

the weary waste of waters, and, all suddenly, he cried, "A sail! a sail!" and staggered to his feet.

A signal was hastily constructed, and waved frantically. The men who had been so light-headed seemed a little to recover their scattered senses, and Hope's heart beat so heavily with suspense she could scarcely breathe.

Would the ship pass them? Would she go unheeded on her way? Oh, Heaven would not be so cruel!

Gabriel's arm was about her; his voice, weak and hoarse, said,—

"Courage! courage! cling to me, Hope; our trials are surely ended. A little while and we shall be in safety and comfort."

And so indeed it was. The vessel had sighted them, and, changing her bearings, was fast approaching.

Some of the poor souls were too exhausted to show any rapture or emotion, and sat apathetically in the boat, hardly caring to be rescued. Others laughed and cried together, and Hope held fast to her companion, because a deadly faintness had fallen upon her and her senses seemed to swoon.

When she opened her eyes she was in the cabin of the *Etruria*, with kind faces bending over her.

"She will do now," said a hearty voice. "She is young, and has a splendid constitution. Lie still, my dear; you have come bravely through an awful ordeal, and now you are going to help me by obeying my orders implicitly. I am the ship's doctor."

The *Etruria* was homeward bound, and, everything being favourable, she made good speed.

Before they reached Malta, Esperance had almost entirely recovered her lost strength, and gave ready assistance to those who had been less fortunate than she. But Mrs. Julian's state gave her great cause for anxiety. The poor lady remained so weak and prostrate that even the most hopeful on board prophesied her death, and thought it quite impossible that she could ever reach England. But they were false prophets after all. On reaching Portsmouth she was carried ashore, and, at her own wish, proceeded by easy stages to Rosemount, where Violet and her husband awaited her. Over the meeting between mother and daughter it is best to draw a veil, for surely such scenes are sacred.

Throughout the voyage Gabriel had scrupulously avoided speaking the words which should bind Esperance to him—with innate delicacy he felt it would be taking a mean advantage of her. Her kindness, her confidence in him during those terrible days, need not mean any change of feeling towards him, but if he spoke she would probably hold herself bound to accept the man whose goodness had been her solace. So he waited. And when strength was returning to Mrs. Julian and all the clouds were passing from her sky, Gabriel sought out Esperance.

It was now winter, and the snow lay white on the ground; every tree flashed under the sun laden with nature's own jewels. It was a bright and healthful world, and Esperance rejoiced in it. She had been skating, and was returning for luncheon, with Gabriel for her companion, and, as he looked into the lovely, glowing face, he felt that the time had come when he might speak. The road was lonely, the spot romantic, Esperance herself had shown a sweet confusion altogether foreign to her usual composed manner. So he said,—

"Will you tell me I may speak of what you know has been my one desire since first we met? Hope, mine has been a lonely, and sometimes a sad life; will you come into it to brighten it—not out of pity, but because you can love me?"

She stayed him there with the words,—

"Gabriel, are you quite sure you wish this? That you can forgive me for putting another and a lower man in the place which should have been yours? Are you quite certain that if I say yes—and, oh! with all my heart I long to do so!—that the thought of my old infatuation will never rise between us like a spectre, and so destroy the happiness you thought would be so lasting? Do not answer hastily, I pray you; for your own sake if not for mine, consider."

"Look in my eyes, beloved! is there any hint of change in them? Have you known me so little that you can believe me so light of love? Hope! Hope! come to me; my heart is hungry for its treasure! Only give me your hand and say, your eyes meeting mine, 'I love you, Gabriel!' and I shall be content—ay! more than content, most blessed!"

She put not her hand in his, but—with an infinitely caressing gesture—her arms about his neck. "I love you, Gabriel!" she said, simply and earnestly. And there, under the clear, cold sky, they sealed with a solemn kiss the love which should outlive time, and change, and sorrow—which even death would be powerless to kill, because, in a brighter and better world, it would blossom again into fuller and more perfect beauty!

[THE END.]

LED BY A SPIRIT.

—10:—

THERE was silence in the room; no sound, save the laboured breathing of the dying woman. The flickering light from a single candle shed a pale gleam over the pallid face, and accentuated the darksome gloom of the death-chamber where Rachel Lascelles lay dying. The sands of life—a brief, sad life—were nearly run, and soon she would be at rest.

The pale moon was slowly rising over the mountains, covered with an icy shroud; and the snow lay in deep drifts over the roads, impassable now, which led to the picturesque Yellowstone.

Richard Lascelles sat beside her couch, holding her white hand, with a sort of desperation, as though he could hold her back from the grasp of death. Dick's hard blue eyes rested upon the bit of a hand, and he thought how pretty the pink-tinted fingers had been.

How fair and sweet she had seemed to him only twelve months ago that very night, when she had become his wife.

The hard look deepened in his eyes; he suppressed a sob, and turned aside, that she might not observe his suffering.

"Perhaps 'twas meant for a judgment on me!" he muttered, harshly, a look of terror creeping over his bearded face, "for 'twas a wrong thing artur all, to do to a fellow-creetur. I stole her, that's sartain—for she would a married him sure! Well, Tom Dawson allus hed the best of everything, and it seemed a lettle hard that he should get Rachel, too, and I—I'd loved her all her life!"

Sobs choked his utterance.

The dying woman turned uneasily upon the pillow, and her sad dark eyes sought his face with a look of eager entreaty.

"Dick!" in a weak quivering voice, "don't cry, dear—it's all for the best. Where—where is—baby?"

He started, as with a sudden shock, the swift blood rushing to his bearded cheeks, then receding, leaving him as ghastly pale as the white face upon the pillow before him.

"I—forgot!" he muttered, halfapologetically. He arose and went over to the other side of the bed.

Safe, hidden away under warm blankets, lay a tiny infant, only a few hours old. He lifted it with awkward care, and placed it beside its mother.

Her weak hand rested tenderly upon the little downy head, and all the grand self-abnegation of holy motherhood flashed swiftly into the fading eyes.

"Poor little creature! Poor little motherless lamb!" she whispered, in a quivering voice; "soon to be alone! Dick, is this a punishment for our sin? It was a sin, dear, and all sin brings its own punishment sooner or later. I had promised Tom to be his wife, you know—and—"

"And a bad promise is better broke than kept," he interrupted her, vehemently.

She sighed.

"Maybe so. But I was wrong in letting the

preparations go on for the wedding—my wedding with Tom Dawson, when all the time my heart was yours, Dick, truly yours. He was handsome and dashing enough to please any woman's eyes; but he never touched my heart, Dick, never. No man ever made me feel a thrill of love but you; I have loved you always, dear, and you have been good and kind to me. Heaven bless you for it. Only lying here on my death-bed, I see more clearly now than ever before; and I see, dear, that no sin ever prospers long, and punishment follows closely in the footsteps of wrong-doing. You and I loved each other dearly—passionately; but I loved my father, too—poor old father!—and his heart was set upon my marrying Tom. So I weakly let things drift along, until the very night before my wedding arrived.

"Then you came to me, looking so wild and haggard, so sad and full of suffering, that all my heart went out to you with one mad leap and I said that I could not marry Tom Dawson, for I loved you too well. Maybe I was right—maybe wrong!"

"You was right, Rachel—dead right," interposed Dick Lascelles, hastily. "It's a sin and a crime to marry jes' to please your father, and you all the time a-longin' for another man's love. S'pose you'd married Tom, and all this year you wanted me—me—the man who'd lay down and die for you to-night ef so 'twould save you, Rachel!"

"I know—I know!"

How feeble this weak voice had grown. The fading eyes closed wearily.

"I'm nearly gone, Dick," she gasped, in broken accents, "and it's agony to me, for I keep asking what's to become of you and—baby! We are shut up here in this wilderness—snowed in; here we've been prisoners for weeks, with no hope of rescue. Then, my trial came upon me, and here, alone with you, baby was born, and Heaven bless her—she is still alive! How will you keep her—what will you feed her with, dear, when I am gone, and you, too, are alone?"

He turned away with a heart-broken cry. But Dick Lascelles was brave and strong to endure; he stooped and kissed the white face.

"Don't worry, darlin'!" he said, gently, "there's plenty to eat in this old house. There's cans o' condensed milk in the storeroom. You know this place is used for a hotel in summer, and so you need fear nothing—no harm will come to baby and me—while we wait for spring to come—but—but—"

His voice died away into a trembling whisper. Loud and shrill, borne on the bitter wintry blast, a sound reached their ears. It was the howl of wild beasts outside their shelter.

Dick Lascelles and his wife had lost their way while travelling back to civilization, and the stinging wintry cold had found them and settled down upon them, and they were ice and snow-bound. But Providence had not forsaken them, for they had found the deserted summer hotel, where provisions and some fuel were discovered; and here, having made their way inside and taken possession, they had been sheltered and fed until now, when death had come to release one prisoner.

She passed away in the night, quite painlessly. Poor Rachel Lascelles. White, and still, and dead she lay upon her bed, the cold hands forever folded upon the icy heart, the dark eyes closed in their last long, dreamless sleep.

Burial was impossible for the present. Snow-bound, with the great soft winter drifts piled up all about the doors and windows, the heart-broken husband could do nothing but sit beside the cold dead form, with his living child in his arms, while outside the house the wild beasts howled hoarsely.

Days passed, and grew into weeks. The child lived and grew strong, but the father faded and drooped. The scanty store of provisions was nearly exhausted; only the milk—he hoarded it as a miser hoards his gold, to preserve the frail life which was his only hope on earth.

With a trembling hand Dick Lascelles wrote a full account of the tragic events, and left the

paper where it would be easily discovered; for well he knew that his own time was short. The pangs of hunger were already racking his frame; but the child lived and grew rosy and strong shut up in that dismal prison; a veritable Edelweiss growing upon the rock-bound soil amid the gleaming snows of the Yellowstone.

Three weeks after Rachel Lascelles' death, Dick lifted the decaying body in his arms one day, and bore it to the door of the house. It must be given burial, it must be hidden away out of sight. With trembling hands he scooped a deep, dark pit in the snow-drifts at the door—close to the door, for he could go no farther; tenderly and reverently he laid the body down and covered it with a snowy blanket, there to lie until spring and human relief should come.

Then he went back to his lonely hearth and desolate shelter. How horrible it was to lie awake in the long, long, seemingly endless nights, and fancy that he could hear the sound of her footsteps, the beating of her cold hands against the barred door, the sad, sweet voice calling softly,—

"Dick—Dick! my husband—let me in! It is cold in the ground, and dreary. Let me in!"

And often he would start from his bed in the dreary night watches and creep to the door, unbar it, and peer out into the snowclad night.

Nothing—no one; only the dismal howl of a beast of prey, coming nearer—nearer. Closing the door he would go back to bed and the warm companionship of his little child.

But the end came at last, and Dick Lascelles, literally starving, lay down to die. Beside him he placed the written paper which told all, and indicated the spot where his wife's body could be found.

One morning the grey light of day struggled in at the frost-covered window and rested upon the faces of a dead man and a living child. Who would find the little one? Must it, too, perish?

What spirit ever possessed Tom Dawson, the driver of the famous Yellowstone Park stage, to make a visit to the deserted hotel no one can tell. He declared that it was a spirit that led his footsteps thither. But, after a long and dangerous journey upon snow shoes, the dashing, adventurous stage-driver made his appearance at the deserted building, and was almost paralyzed to hear the sound of a child's voice screaming lustily.

It was the work of a few moments to effect an entrance into the house, and there the horrible truth was soon learned.

The child was fed and rescued, Dick's body buried temporarily, to be removed in the spring time, together with Mary's, to a green and sunny slope, where they now lie, side by side, awaiting the resurrection.

And the child? Tom's big loving heart expanded and took in the little orphan—the child of the only woman he had ever loved. Henceforth she was his, to have and to hold. He christened her Edelweiss, but as often as not, he calls her, with tender kisses and caresses, "Tom's Little Snow-Drop!"

AN ingenious engineer proposes to show the inhabitants of Antwerp a veritable castle in the air. He has designed a sort of raft, having an area of about 150 square feet, and made of bamboo canes and steels and aluminum piping. Upon this is to be built a most luxuriously fitted restaurant. The raft will be held, floating in the air, five hundred feet above the ground, by a number of balloons, and an arrangement of anchoring by means of cables will prevent the restaurant from rocking, even in the roughest wind. Two small captive balloons, each holding from eight to ten persons, are to serve as elevators between the aerial restaurant and the earth. There is a regular system for supplying gas to the balloons and at night the exhibition will be illuminated by an immense electric light projected from the raft. The whole thing can be lowered to the ground within ten minutes by steam windlasses specially constructed.

FACETIÆ.

"How is it that young Hardup has so much money now?" "Oh, he married a *loan* widow last month."

"WAITER!" "Yes, sir." "What's this?" "It's bean soup, sir." "No matter what it has been; the question is, What is it now?"

MRS. CRIMSONBEAK: "The cows are in the corn, John." Mr. Crimsonbeak: "All right, dear; the corn will soon be in the cows."

MISS QUIDNUNC: "Do you think that genius is hereditary?" Praxiteles Beau: "I can't tell; I have as yet no children."

FRANK: "Were you actually surprised, as you said, when I proposed?" May: "Yes, indeed; I really had all but given you up."

SUITOR: "I have come, sir, to ask you to give me your daughter's hand." Paterfamilias: "Why, sir, when I last saw it, it was in your possession."

PHOTOGRAPHER: "Now, madam, if it is not asking—or too much of you, will you—er—kindly make an effort to—h—to look pleasant? It will only be for a moment."

SPECTATOR: "Doesn't it require a deal of courage to go up in a balloon?" Aeronaut: "Not a bit, ma'am. It's the coming down in it."

MENDICANT: "Can't you give a poor blind man a few coppers?" Banker: "No! The outlook is so bad that you are to be congratulated."

"GEORGE, father has failed." "That's just like him! I told you all along, darling, that he was going to do all he could to keep us from being married."

"WHAT'S the difference between a cat and a legal document?" Answer: "The one has claws at the end of its paws; the other has paws at the end of its claws."

DEALER: "Yes; I'll kill the fowls for you and send them home." Very New Housewife (hesitatingly): "Well, if you are *poitinely* sure they are fresh, you may. My husband will only eat fowl when it is fresh."

BURGLAR: "Where do you keep your money?" Biggsby: "Er—it's in the pocket of my wife's dress." Burglar (to pal): "Come on, Bill, let's be off. We ain't no Stanley explorin' expedition."

"You seem weary, Mrs. Jones," said the friend who had already stopped an hour and a half. "Have you had many tiresome callers to-day?" "Oh, no; you are the first." And then Mrs. Jones wondered why she went so quickly.

"WHAT the deuce are you doing right on the top of that tree, Mike? Don't you see that it's being cut down?" "Yes, your honour; the last time ye had a tree cut down it fell on the top of me, and, begorra, O'll be safe this time."

MRS. YOUNGMA: "And so my baby got the prize at the baby show! I knew he would. It couldn't have been otherwise." Old Bachelor (one of the judges): "Yes, madame, we all agreed that your baby was the least objectionable of the lot."

BENEVOLENT PARTY: "My man, don't you think fish-ing is cruel sport?" Fisherman: "Cruel! Well, I should say so. I have sat here six hours and have not had a bite, been nearly eaten up by mosquitoes, and the sun has parboiled the back of my neck."

THIS pretty story is told of a distinguished lawyer: He and his wife were at a social gathering, where the question was discussed, "Who would you rather be if not yourself?" His wife asked him for his reply to the question. He answered, promptly, "Your second husband, dear."

SWELL OF THE PERIOD: "Oh, doctor! I have sent for you, certainly; still, I must confess I have not the slightest faith in modern medical science." Doctor: "Oh! that doesn't matter in the least. You see, a mule has no faith in the veterinary surgeon; and yet he cures him all the same."

"Your husband, Mrs. Muggleby, is suffering from a complication of diseases," said the doctor. "I must first make a diagnosis." "I hope you can make it of calico, then," was the good soul's reply, "for I haven't a piece of flannel in the house."

"I SAY there! Your dog got into my hen-house last night and ate four of my chickens. Now, what are you going to do about it?" "Well," replied the offending animal's owner, "any dog that can eat four of your chickens deserves a medal."

GUSSIE SOFTLEIGH: "Weally, I cawn't imagine anything more howwible than being braxed to death by a howwid cow, cawn you, Miss Bluntley?" Miss Bluntley: "No, Mr. Softleigh, unless it is to meet the same fate by a calf." Then she drove the remark into his head with a yawn, and he faded away.

"ROSE," said the adorer, taking his hat and came for the seventh time, and making the third pretence of leaving since eleven o'clock, "Rose, bid me but hope. I could wait for you for ever." "That's all very well, Mr. Staylate," said the beautiful girl, coldly, "but you needn't begin to-night."

MISS DAISY (who has spent her whole summer in trying to elevate the simple country people with whom she has been staying): "Good-bye, Mr. Stiles; I hope my visit here hasn't been entirely without good results." Farmer Stiles: "Sartin not, sartin not. You've learnt a heap since you first came here, but you was purty nigh the greenest one we ever had on our hands."

LITTLE ROGER had gone into the country for the first time, and his grandfather had taken him out to see the colts. "There, Roger," said the old gentleman, "did you ever see such a little horse as that?" Roger never had, and his eyes shone; but there was one drawback. "What's the matter with him, grandpa?" he said. "He hasn't any rockers!"

"Did you know that I passed your door last evening?" said the young man, tenderly. "Of course," replied the beautiful girl, with reproach in her glistening eyes. "Do you think I would not know your step?" "Certainly," said the happy young man, as he directed the conversation away from the subject, and avoided remarking that he had passed the door in a cab.

"ARE you a good plain cook, Mary?" asked the lady of the house of the tenth applicant for a position. "Yes, um." "Are you a good laundress?" "Yes, um." "Are you quick with your work? Can you clean with alacrity?" "Yes, um, I guess so," replied Mary, doubtfully. Then in a burst of confidence she said, "You see, mum, I don't know much about alacrity. In me last place they always used sand, and soap for scouring and cleaning."

A SOMEWHAT simple Scotchman, when taking his bairns to be baptized, usually spoke of them as laddies or lassies, as the case might be. At last his wife, possessed of the idea that the terms used were inelegant said he must in the future say "infant." The next time Sandy took another of his babies to be baptized, the minister asked, "Weel, Sandy, is it a laddie?" "It's nae a laddie," was the answer. "Then it's a lassie." "It's nae a lassie," said Sandy. "Weel, weel, mon, what is it, then?" asked the surprised minister. "I dinna remember vera weel," said Sandy, "but I think the gudewife said it was an illefant."

SOME Englishmen were one day exploring the heights of Mont Blanc, when, after proceeding some distance, one of the number left his companions and tried to retrace his steps alone. Being a perfect stranger in those regions, he soon discovered he had lost his way. To his relief he saw in the distance another gentleman whom he took to be a foreigner. Going up to him, he asked in several languages if he could direct him to his hotel; but not a word did he reply, only shaking his head with a puzzled expression, which quite enraged the gentleman, who at length exclaimed in a loud voice: "Why, you stupid fool! what countryman are you?" Imagine his discomfiture when the answer came: "Beg pardon, sir; I can speak English."

"JOHN" said his wife, "I have a conundrum for you." "All right. But you know conundrums are out of style." "That fact won't hurt this one anyway," she answered. "Let us have it." "Why am I like a popular story?" "Because everybody admires you." "That isn't the answer." "What is it then?" "Because," and she glanced at her calico dress, "I am never out of print." And the next day he gave her *carte blanche* at the dry goods store.

"BABY was taken very bad while you were out, mum," said the new servant girl. "Oh, dear!" said the young wife. "Is he better now?" "Oh, he's all right now; but he was bad at first. He seemed to come over quite faint; but I found his medicine in the cupboard—" "Found his medicine! Good gracious! What have you been giving the child! There's no medicine in the cupboard!" "Oh, yes, there is, mum. It's written on it." And then did that girl triumphantly produce a bottle labelled "Kid Reviver!"

IN France, instead of our "What else may I show you?" the shopkeepers use the phrase, "And with that?" An Englishman recently in Paris had bought several things in a large shop there, and considered the formula repeated between each purchase most impertinent. The last thing he bought was a pocket handkerchief, and the shopman most blandly asked, "And with that?" This proved too much for the exasperated Briton, who angrily replied, "And with that" (pointing to the pocket-handkerchief). "I blow my nose, you impertinent blockhead!"

"WHAT on earth was that whistle blowing for all night?" asked a fair and blooming daughter of her mother this morning. "That is the fog-horn, my dear," was the reply. "The fog-horn, what is that?" "Why, when there is a heavy fog they set the big steam whistle, and it blows while the fog lasts." "But why?" persisted Golden Locks. "I should think that anybody could see that there was a fog, and what is the use of blowing a whistle to tell them about it, when there is if they want to look at it?"

A CLERGYMAN was once annoyed by people talking and giggling during the service. He paused, looked at the disturbers, and said: "Some years since, as I was preaching, a young man who sat before me was constantly laughing, talking, and making uncouth grimaces. I paused, and administered a severe rebuke. After the close of the services, a gentleman said to me, 'Sir, you made a great mistake; that young man was an idiot.' Since then I have always been afraid to reprove those who misbehave in chapel, lest I should repeat that mistake, and rebuke another idiot." During the rest of the services there was good order.

"DELIA!" loudly called her mistress from an upper chamber, on a sultry afternoon. "Yes, ma'am." "I am very tired and I am going to lie down for an hour." "Yes, ma'am." "If I should happen to drop off call me at five o'clock." "Yes, ma'am." So the lady laid down, folded her hands, closed her eyes, and was soon in the land of dreams. She was awakened by the clock striking six, and called indignantly, "Delia!" "Yes, ma'am." "Why didn't you call me at five o'clock as I ordered?" "Shure, ma'am, ye tould me to call ye if ye dropped off. I looked in on ye at five, and ye hadn't dropped off at all. Ye was lyin' on the bed in the same place, sound asleep!"

THERE is an old lady living in a Somersetshire village who makes frantic efforts to keep abreast of the times. Circumscribed, however, in her social sphere, and with limited opportunities of development, it is difficult, and she is compelled sometimes to resort to her imagination, the result being occasionally of a somewhat surprising and amusing description. Vain in the effort to tell her anything she does not already know, or startle her with information: Last winter she went to the church "sociable," and, as she entered the room, one of the young ladies said, "Good evening, auntie. I am very glad you came; we are going to have a tableau this evening." "Yes, I know, I know," replied the old lady, "you needn't tell me that. Why, I smelt 'em cooking when I first came in at the door."

SOCIETY.

THE confinement of the Duchess of York is expected to take place during the month bearing her name.

THE King of Roumania has conferred upon the Crown Princess the Grand Cordon of the Order of the Crown, with the star set in brilliants.

THE young sons of the King of Siam are in London, under the care of their step-uncle, for the purpose of receiving an English education.

PRINCE AND PRINCESS CHRISTIAN are settled at Cumberland Lodge for the winter. The house has been altered and done up, and the drainage thoroughly overhauled.

THE Duchess of York has been busy of late in arranging the disposition of the offerings of congratulation which came from all parts of the world.

THERE is again a matrimonial rumour about Princess Maude. Should it prove to have foundation, the country would be pleased, as the reported fiancé is not a foreigner, but a young, popular, and manly British nobleman.

IT is probable that there will be an amateur performance, in which Princess Beatrice will take part, of one of the original operettas which Signor Tosti is writing by command of her Majesty, and another will probably be given during the Christmas residence of the Court at Osborne.

IT is thought probable that the Princess of Wales will take another trip in the Mediterranean, probably about the beginning of March. In any case, the Princess would not be absent for more than two months, and would, as before, be accompanied by the Princesses Maude and Victoria.

THE eldest son of Prince Albrecht of Prussia, who is now nineteen years of age, and is spoken of as the future husband of the Queen of Holland, is to join his regiment, the first Prussian Foot Guards, for active duty on April 1, 1894, and after a year of military work will go to the Bonn University for earnest study.

THE Princess of Wales and her daughters dress sensibly in the country, and are not deterred from taking healthful exercise by fear of muddy roads. They wear neat, light, strong boots, with good square medium-height heels. Their gowns are short but not remarkably so, and are of tweed, invariably excellent in style and irreproachable in fit, since Redfern is their chosen tailor, and their hats for country wear are weather defying.

THE Emperor of Russia has resolved upon having a finer yacht built than any which belongs to a foreigner, either Emperor or Prince. The Czar especially aims at eclipsing the yacht of the German Emperor. The Czar's yacht is to be built with the express object of being converted into a man-of-war, should there be any need for the strengthening of the Russian navy.

THE Queen has been anxious for several years past to visit Naples, and it is probable that her Majesty will carry out her wish next spring. King Humbert has placed the famous Royal palace of Capodimonte, which stands on a hill commanding a splendid view of the city and bay, at the Queen's disposal. Capodimonte, which was built by Charles III., is a vast rectangular structure, containing nearly sixty rooms, which are hung with modern paintings. The interior was redecorated and refurnished a few years ago, when the sanitary arrangements and water supply were overhauled. The grounds, which are more than three miles in circuit, are beautifully diversified and richly wooded, and they contain many miles of winding drives. There is a large wood of evergreen oaks laid out in shady walks, and in another part of the grounds a vineyard, through which there is a very long walk under a trailage of vines.

STATISTICS.

THE average height of clouds is a mile, or rather a little over.

IT is computed that 950,000 dinners and lunches are served daily in London restaurants.

THE average cost of a fully-equipped lifeboat, with transporting carriage, life-belts, etc., is £700.

THERE are reported to be no less than fifty abandoned ships floating about the Atlantic, and constituting a considerable danger to other vessels.

HOLLAND excels the world in its average yield of potatoes. That country produces 177 bushels to the acre; Italy comes next with 164; Germany, 121; France, 102; the United States, 76.

GEMS.

ABUSE may not be criticism, but sometimes the latter sounds very much like the former.

REASON cannot show itself more reasonable than to cease reasoning on things that are above reasoning.

THE reason why people so ill know how to do their duty on great occasions is that they will not be diligent in doing their duty on little occasions.

MANKIND is always happier for having been made happy. If you make them happy now you will make them thrice happy twenty years hence in the memory of it.

SOME man says that when one reads a medical book he fancies he has every disease described, but when he reads the work of a moralist he discovers all the faults he points out in others.

HOUSEHOLD TREASURES.

MIXED PIES.—Minced meat, puff paste, quarter pound of butter, quarter pound of lard, half pound of flour, a pinch of cream of tartar. Mix the cream of tartar with the flour, add a pinch of salt, and rub in two ounces of lard, mix with water; turn on to a pasteboard, roll it out, and put half the butter on, turn it over, roll it out and put on the remainder of the butter and lard, fold it over and roll it out three times; line patty pans with the paste, put in a spoonful of mince meat, cover with paste, and bake in a good oven for from twenty minutes to half an hour.

CHRISTMAS PUDDING.—One pound bread crumbs, one pound currants, half-pound finely chopped suet, half-pound sugar, half a nutmeg, one pound stoned raisins, two ounces candied peel, one dessertspoonful ginger, three eggs. Mix the bread crumbs with the suet, then add half a teaspoonful of salt, and stir in the other ingredients, the candied peel, cut in thin strips, and the ginger finely grated; mix thoroughly with the eggs, put into basins, tie down securely, plunge them in boiling water and boil five hours at first. These puddings are better made a month or so before they are wanted. When required, plunge in boiling water, and boil for two hours longer.

HOUGH SOUR.—Cut the meat from the bone in pieces, pare away all fat and skin, put the pieces into a goblet with enough water to cover them; sprinkle salt over the meat, and set on the hob back from the fire, for about fifteen minutes; it will then be found that the juices have been largely drawn off into the water; now take an iron spoon or a wooden "beetle" and complete the process by pressing the meat firmly until it has become absolutely white and bloodless; the soup should then be set close to the fire to simmer until it boils, when it may be served; while simmering, a small bunch of parsley, tied with thread, may be thrown into the pot, and sometimes a little rice "burst" with water in the ordinary way is added when the soup is boiling.

MISCELLANEOUS.

LIVERPOOL has the largest local debt of any town in England.

THE latest thing in hotel bills of fare is stated to be an edible menu card.

PERSONS bearing the same surname are forbidden to marry in China.

THE only remaining memento of Napoleon's residence in Elba consists of a fine plane-tree which he planted near the villa he lived in.

QUEUES have been worn by Chinamen since 1627. They were first worn as a sign of degradation.

THE following words are to be found but once in the Bible: ash, atonement, immortal, millions, and reverend.

IT is said that a sugar fifteen times sweeter than cane-sugar and twenty times sweeter than beet-sugar has been extracted from cotton-seed meal by a German chemist.

THE peacock throne of Shah Jehan was valued at £6,000,000, his crown at £2,500,000, and when he died £50,000,000 worth of gems were found in his treasury.

ATTEMPTS have been made to produce spider silk, but have failed, the ferocious nature of these insects not permitting them to live together in communities.

THE orange and lemon are both said to be fatal to the cholera bacillus. Placed in contact with the cut surface of the fruit the bacteria survive but a few hours.

THE Japanese tattoo likenesses of individuals on the bodies of persons who are fond of this kind of ornamentation. The likenesses are copied from photographs, and are usually remarkably accurate.

THE Chinese doctor's lot is not wholly a happy one. Four members of the Imperial College of Physicians at Peking failed recently to make a proper diagnosis of the Emperor's indisposition, and were punished by being fined a year's salary.

WIDOWS seldom marry again in China, and widowhood is esteemed as a condition of the highest respectability. When a widow attains her fiftieth year, the government supplies her with a tablet on which her virtues are emblazoned. This is displayed over the door of her house.

CANTON, with its million inhabitants, is a queer place, indeed. The huge wall surrounding it, 15 ft. to 25 ft. wide, is 6 miles in circuit, the space enclosed being filled up with a maze of narrow lanes. The place is full of temples; every street has an altar. Some 320,000 of the inhabitants live on boats.

THE KINGS of SARDINIA formerly described themselves as "By the grace of God, King of Sardinia, of France, Spain, and England, of Italy and Jerusalem, of Greece and Alexandria, of Hamburg and Sicily, Ruler of the Midway Sea, Master of the deep, King of the earth, Protector of the Holy Land."

PRUSSIC acid is so deadly that seeds immersed in it will never germinate, and, if poured on the stems of plants, they will in most cases die. The acid is not, properly speaking, a "burning" acid like nitric acid, but for all that is the most powerful poison known to the chemist. Others may or may not be deadly, prussic acid is sure to be, and that so quickly that no time is left for the use of an antidote.

As a matter of fact, and in spite of its reputed feat of having carried Mahomet in four jumps from Jerusalem to Mecca, seven miles an hour is the camel's best pace; nor can it maintain this rate over two hours. Its usual speed is about five miles an hour—a slow lounging pace, beyond which it is dangerous, with nine camels out of ten, to urge them, or else, as Asiatics say, they "break their hearts" and die "literally" on the spot. Once a camel has been pressed beyond this speed and is spent, it kneels down, and nothing will persuade it to move a foot again. A fire under its tail is as useless as food in front of its nose. That camel remains where it kneels, and where it kneels it dies.

NOTICES TO CORRESPONDENTS.

M. T.—Could not say.

W. A.—A whale is a warm-blooded animal.

HUMBERT.—We cannot give you the address.

JENKS.—Such small events are not on record.

DARKINGTON.—Bets cannot be recovered by law.

DAVIE.—The 11th November, 1867, was a Monday.

BARTLEY.—We cannot venture to give any opinion.

S. E.—The late General Gordon was never married.

HAWKLEY.—Everything would depend upon the size of the houses.

ROBERTS.—Any good printer's ink works well with rubber stamps.

CHAWLEY.—Last total eclipse of sun seen in Britain was on 22nd May, 1724.

R. T. M.—It is impossible for a human mind to conceive such a sum.

FRISWORTHY JIM.—French would be of more use to you than Gorman.

JENNIE.—Jane and Janet both have same origin, they are the feminine of John.

QUESTION.—Just what they will fetch. Take them to a dealer.

TROUBLED ONE.—Your best plan is to go to the court and explain the circumstances.

INQUIRER.—Only a lawyer can tell what would be the cost of a deed of gift.

IGNORANT SALLY.—"La mascotte" is the provincial name for a girl who brings luck with her.

EMMIE.—You can get any of his songs by order through any music seller.

DOT.—A girl under sixteen can legally marry, with the consent of her parents.

MARY.—Boiled ham and tongue should be sliced as thin as the knife blade.

G. O. L.—The name "Cowper" is usually, but not always, pronounced Cooper.

TOMMY.—The earliest record of cavalry is on the Assyrian monuments about 1000 B.C.

P. J.—Geography as a science was introduced into Europe by the Moors about 1240.

MAT.—Honey, kept in the light, granulates. Therefore the bees always store it in the dark.

TATTYCOORAM.—Bolt the soldered articles in a weak acid solution—one part sulphuric acid, five parts water.

CONSTANTINE.—You can change the surname, but not the baptismal, if you have been confirmed.

CONSTANT READER.—For income-tax purposes the income of the wife is reckoned with that of the husband.

FAINY LIL.—The word is from the French, and means something that brings good luck.

BETTY.—When a lady and gentleman are riding on horseback the gentleman should be on the lady's right.

REGULAR SUBSCRIBER.—The illegitimate children are not entitled to share in the property, unless there is a will bequeathing it to them.

HENRY.—You are not liable for windows broken by your son. He may be summoned before the justices, and if old enough may be punished.

ELLIOTT.—It is necessary to have a gun license in order to carry a pistol; the authorities do not enforce the law strictly.

HONORA.—In the United States servants are well paid, also in Australia; but in the latter the work is harder and of a rougher kind.

ELMER.—Such a marriage could only take place by making false statements, for which the author might be punished, but the marriage would not be illegal.

LORNA.—"Diamond" dyes, usually sold by chemists, are best for household use, and have full directions on packets.

CONNIE.—Servants are not responsible for "breakages" unless wilful misconduct or gross carelessness caused the occurrence.

INGENUITY.—It is really not worth while to try to make soap; a really good article can be bought wholesale very much cheaper than you could produce it.

DOWNVAL.—The Mersey Tunnel is four miles and a half long, including the approach. The Severn Tunnel 22,992 feet long. The Thames and Medway Tunnel 21,982 feet long.

FESTUS FINELEY.—The claim for storage will not be entertained; the party has been sufficiently paid for that in the use he or she has had of the articles, that is how the court would look at it.

D. E. F.—Rub the spots thickly with soap, and then scrape fine chalk on them. Put on the grease, and keep damped. Chloride of lime sometimes requires to be used, but the other way is safest.

RICHARD.—It is impossible for anyone to say that you could have any prospect, immediate or remote, of employment there, if you are going out on pure "spec," without either recommendations or testimonials that would open a way for you.

VERUS.—Give your gold fish occasionally a little grated raw lean beef, or grated raw fish, or a small worm or two; some add a crumb of sponge biscuit, but that is not very good for the fish.

BOB.—Members of the Royal Irish Constabulary, when appointed, must be between nineteen and twenty-five years of age, unmarried, and are not allowed to serve in a county where they have relatives.

WILLIE.—There are unquestionably callings that are much more lucrative, but really first-class telegraph experts generally can find, and retain, a situation and obtain good pay.

HOSTESS.—The play may be succeeded by a supper, which should be participated in by the audience as well as the amateurs. If a supper be inconvenient, refreshments and loes may be passed around between the acts.

OWEN.—If the animal became confused and ran in the way of danger, compelling the man to ride him down in order to save himself or others from injury perhaps, you have no case.

LONDON LAD.—As a rule the cockade is worn by the liveried servants of military and naval officers, lord-lieutenants, deputy-lieutenants, and privy councillors; but we know no "law" on the subject.

ROMEO.—A crossed cheque must be paid through a bank. If you have no account you can get some friend to cash the cheque, or pay it into his account for collection. The commission charged varies with the amount of the cheque.

GABRIELLE.—We advise you to consult a surgeon personally as to what is best to do for the removal of the warts. If unskillfully treated they frequently leave scars which are much more unsightly than the growth themselves.

OTTO.—One of the parties must give notice to the district registrar of the intended marriage, and in twenty-one days a certificate will be issued. If the parties live in different districts, notice must be given to both registrars for marriage without licence.

THE NOBLEST THING OF ALL.

A WONDROUS thought my idle tongue let fall,
One day, while musing o'er the lives of men—
Of all the noble deeds that e'er have been,
Which truly is the noblest of them all?
Was it some deed of arms by Trojan wall,
Or act of love in some foul prison den,
Or bold investiture from a flaming pen,
Or gentle ministry beside the pall?
But in the pause my heart made answer hold.
I knew a life whose days were dark and cold,
Each hour seemed fraught with more than soul could stand
Of bitter grief that turns the heart to stone—
Yet on that face a smile like heaven shone.
This was the noblest thing of all. 'Twas grand!

C. H.

INQUISITIVE ONE.—Tears are the secretion of a special gland situated in the upper parts of the orbit. The flow is practically beyond control of the will, and is produced by the excitement of certain nerves by means of certain impulses or emotions conveyed from the brain.

HILARIA.—Of course we take it for granted that the number of your guests will be somewhat limited, or in accordance with the dimensions of your residence. Else at the play, as well as at the supper, there will be much worry and confusion, and very little pleasure.

HULDAH.—You evidently have a good deal of artistic talent, and with perseverance and close application should make something creditable of yourself. You might take evening lessons, unless you were in a position to devote your days to your studies.

P. O.—A life prisoner is liberated at twenty years' end altogether irrespective of how he has behaved—of course, should he have been guilty of actual crime while in jail he will be punished for that; formerly well-conducted prisoners were set free at fifteen years' end, but not so now.

VARE.—There are various species of tortoises, the habits of which differ considerably. The common land tortoise which sleeps through the winter, generally scooping a place for itself in the earth, but always selecting its own couch and hiding-place for the long winter sleep.

D. C.—The King of Denmark has six children living—namely, the Crown Prince, the Princess of Wales, the King of Greece, the Empress of Russia, the Princess Thyra (married to the Duke of Cumberland) and Prince Waldemar married to the eldest daughter of the Duke of Chartres.

SUFFERING MORTAL.—If it is really palpitation with which you are afflicted, the utmost you can do in the way of remedy is to take care of yourself—avoid haste above all things, also over-exertion; keep on level ground as much as possible, do not smoke or drink intoxicating liquors, and be regular in retiring at night.

DISTRACTED HOUSEWIFE.—There must be some cause at work to produce the flies in the numbers you mention which completely counteracts all your trapping efforts; pennyworth of grasshopper chips boiled in pint of water, and made very sweet, either with honey or sugar, attracts flies freely, and poisons them off as fast as they come; put a little of the liquid in saucers at different places in the room.

PERPLEXED PETER.—If he is sufficiently fond of the young lady, the best thing to do is to marry her, if he can, and then he can claim as many kisses as he chooses. Under the present existing circumstances, we should commend the young lady's wisdom.

JUSTINA.—The very best tooth powder is precipitated chalk; it is absolutely harmless and will clean the enamel without affecting the gums. Orris root or a little wintergreen added gives a pleasant flavour, but in no way improves the chalk.

DAPHNE.—Best and dust well. Mix one part ground rice, two parts powdered starch, two parts bread crumb. First rub in well with a clean flannel to all the most soiled portions, and throw away the mixture used on them. With fresh mixture clean all over by rubbing with the flannel and brush.

IGNORANT LAD.—He should open the gate, then step back and wait for her to pass through. The same form is observed in passing into a building or any place where a door must be opened. It is not proper for a man to open a gate or door and pass through, leaving the lady to follow, although many men do this.

BERTHAM.—Conscription, that is compulsory service in the army, has often been advocated for England, but has never been proposed in Parliament by any Ministry, so far as we know. In a limited form it applies to the militia, the home force raised by quotas on counties.

TRIXY.—Have two or three flat irons heated, spread the ticking out on the table. With your hot iron in one hand and the beeswax in the other, pass the iron over a portion of the ticking, follow it with the wax. So warm the wax before beginning to make it work easier.

CLARA.—Soak it for a few hours, scrape carefully, and put it on in cold water. Let it boil; allow it to boil gently for three hours; remove from the fire and let it half cool in the water, keeping the lid on. Then take it out, take off the skin, and cover with brown raspings of bread. This is long enough for a good sized bacon ham.

LOVER OF BIRDS.—Sit down with your starling in a quiet room, and repeat over and over again slowly and distinctly the phrase you wish it to learn; when it makes an evident attempt at it, which may not be till you have practised with it for an hour or more during two or three days, give it a tit-bit; after first effort it learns speedily.

ARCHIE.—The House of Lords is not obliged to pass a bill which has been three times passed by the House of Commons. As a rule, if the verdict of a general election is in favour of an important measure passed by the Commons and rejected by the Lords, then on a second presentation of the bill, the Lords give way, and pass it.

EMILIA C.—It is impossible to avoid publicity in applying for a divorce. If the daily papers do not get hold of all the particulars in certain cases, they obtain possession of enough of the details to keep up the appetite for such matters, and thus the party who is free from blame is inseparably connected in the public mind with the one who has caused all her woe.

ONE WHO LIKES THE "LONDON READER."—The monetary value of such a gift must be small, unless the two are affianced lovers. The artistic qualities or the ingenuity, or the taste, or the meaning expressed by the gift may be as great as the gentleman is capable of appreciating and conveying, but the money consideration must not enter into the gift, or the girl's self-respect will be injured.

DORIS.—Ferns and leaves should be gathered on a dry day and immediately placed between sheets of blotting-paper. Put these under a board and on this place a heavy weight, or put them in a copying-press, if one is handy. Press them for some time, changing them into dry paper about once a week. If well-matured and not damp a single change may be sufficient.

ANXIOUS FOR ADVICE.—Some seem to be cured, others may be more or less benefited, and others appear to get no good whatever from any sort of treatment. There are various cures advertised, and much is said of their efficacy, but where there is such wide difference in the opinions of experts, it is scarcely safe to give a decided opinion. The only positive and unfailing "cure" for the liquor habit is to avoid contracting it.

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"GOOD MORNING, SIR!"

London Reader

CHRISTMAS NUMBER

WITH No. 1597.—VOL. LXII.]

FOR THE WEEK ENDING DECEMBER 9, 1893.

[PRICE TWOPENCE.]

Christmas.

COME now the sacred morn
To our spirits tired and worn,
Bringing with the chant and chime
Memories of that after time
When to sinful man was given
Pledge of peace and love from heaven
And herald strain and angel throng
Echoed forth the rapturous song—
Welcomed in the holy ray
Of the first glad Christmas Day.

Joyful let us greet it now,
With light hearts and cheerful brow,
Bright warm hearths and mirthful bands,
Kindly eyes and clasping hands;
Greetings frank and words of cheer,
To the friends and kindred near.

Meekly, humbly lay aside
Angry tone and look of pride,
Memory of wrong or woe—
Treacherous friend or cruel foe—
All that chills the heart below.

And round cheerful board and hearth,
'Midst words of joy and songs of mirth
Let each grateful spirit be
Fraught with holy charity:
Nor envy, care, nor malice find
Resting-place in heart or mind;
But kindly tone and open hand,
And the deed of mercy planned,
To our suffering neighbours prove

Our Christmas faith and Christmas
love,
Worthy of this solemn time,
Hallowed by His love sublime,
Who bore with patience wrong and
blame,
Poverty and want and shame—
All that earth's poor wanderers fear
Of mortal pain and suffering here.

So with faith's best prayer and praise
Shall we hail the day of days;
So with charity benign,
Bend before its hallowed shrine,
And the heart's best tribute bring
To the altar of our King.

So with meet and harmless mirth
Gather round the social hearth,
And the spirits free from care,
And the welcome uttered there,
And the kindly glance and tone,
And the prayer for loved ones gone,
And the clasp of friendship's hand,
And the greetings, frank and bland,
And the kindly word and deed,
Shown the suffering in their need,
Shall be pleasing in His eyes,
Whose dear human sympathies,
From His throne beyond the skies,
Reacheth, in their joy or woe,
All His creatures here below.

Dark December.

CHAPTER I.

It wanted just two days to Christmas, and the pupils of St. Alban's House—a most select academy for young ladies—had all departed to their own homes. Miss Strong and her younger sister Miss Maria, the joint proprietresses of the establishment, were alone in their private sitting-room, a very cosy little place, and just now, being warm and bright in spite of the bitter cold without, it was as pleasant a retreat as the heart of maiden lady would desire.

But just now the hearts of the two sisters were far too perturbed for them to take any delight in creature comfort. Miss Maria sat in a low chair by the fire; Miss Strong paced the little room with feverish, impatient steps; prospects looked fair; no pupils were leaving this term; some of them were bringing younger sisters back with them after the vacation. The big ledger, kept with such care by Miss Maria, showed a considerable balance in the sisters' favour,—but a serpent, nourished at their own hearth (this was the elder's poetical phrase), had stung them: in a word, the well-to-do, red-faced, bald-headed doctor, whom for the last three years they had expected confidently to propose to one of them, had that very day pleaded his love and offered his hand and heart, not to one of the carefully preserved-principals of St. Alban's House, but to their youngest teacher, Belle Forest, a girl of eighteen, without a penny to bless herself with, and who owed nearly everything in the world to the Misses Strong, at least they thought so.

It was monstrous—shameful! For the last three years Dr. Jabez Leech had been a constant visitor at St. Alban's, calling avowedly to consult the ladies

as to the future of his ward, Natalie Jerome, a little Anglo-Indian, but really, they thought, to enjoy their society. Dr. Jabez Leech had taken tea with Misses Strong on an average twice a month for three years. He had escorted the sisters home from soirées (Bournhill was great at soirées), as regularly as though he had been hired for that purpose. All the town had believed firmly in the genuine nature of his attentions, though no one could quite decide which sister was to be Mrs. Leech. The last point had rather troubled the ladies themselves, but some months ago they had come to an amicable conclusion that whichever was honoured by the doctor's choice should make over her share of the school to the other. The match, therefore, would benefit both, giving the bride a handsome house and wealthy husband, and exactly doubling her sister's worldly wealth, and now their dreams were gone. Belle Forest, with her pretty face, had been preferred before them, and actually—audacious chit!—had declined the honour her betters would have jumped at—she had refused Dr. Leech seriously and decidedly! The little man, unable to realize she could mean such folly, had actually asked Miss Strong to see the young lady and put before her the advantages she was rejecting.

"I could have shaken him!" said Miss Strong, "and been glad to, but I had our dignity to maintain, Maria, and so I just smiled at all he said, and promised to speak seriously to Miss Forest."

"Seriously, indeed! it'll be something more than that. Out of this house she goes to-morrow! I should send her away to-night only it is dark, and she has a long journey before her."

"Her father lives in London, doesn't he?"

"Yes; she has a stepmother and a lot of half-brothers and sisters; the whole family are as poor as church mice. I met Mr. Forest at Cousin Jane's, and he begged me to give his daughter a trial (said it would be such an advantage to her to get into a school like this), and I, with foolish generosity, agreed to take her without a premium."

"On condition she taught the juniors and saw to their wardrobes in return for her board, laundress, and music lessons," summed up Miss Maria. "It was a liberal offer."

"Specially as I offered for her to spend all the holidays, except the summer vacation, here, to save the expense of travelling."

"She has behaved shamefully."

"I shall write a full account of the matter to Mrs. Forest. She struck me as being very sensible; her husband seemed a very foolish sort of person, with not too much backbone; he's sure to spoil the girl."

"Hush! here she comes."

Looking at the girl as she came in, in her fresh young beauty, one could almost understand Dr. Leech's perfidy. Belle was simply charming, no other words described her. She was a direct contradiction to what one might expect a young person in her circumstances to be: in appearance, looks, manners and disposition.

A pupil-teacher received, on the terms quoted by Miss Maria, should have been plain and subdued, humble and sad, a little shabby and with a very depressed air. Belle had none of these things; nature, which had condemned her to poverty, had been lavish in all gifts but gold. Belle was almost startlingly pretty (had they only seen her first, the Stronges would never have engaged her), with a laughing, gipsy face, dark curly hair, and the largest, brightest, of brown eyes. Whatever she wore suited her; you quite forgot the material being cheap and unpretentious when she wore it. To-night she had a dress of ruby-coloured material trimmed with black velvet; it fitted her like a glove, showing every curve of the slender figure, and made her look a charming bit of colour beside the dark-robed sisters.

"Is there anything the matter?" asked Belle, frankly. "Have you had bad news, Miss Strong?"

"We have indeed, Miss Forest. Your shameful conduct has quite prostrated us. How you could have the heartless audacity to lead poor Dr. Leech on to propose to you and then jilt him in this wicked manner is uncomprehensible."

Belle stared at her employers. She was a very shrewd girl, and knew pretty well what their hopes had been. Belle had decided in her own mind the doctor's heart would be caught in the rebound by Miss Maria. Never once had she calculated on his betraying his proposal and its refusal to the sisters.

"Well," said Miss Maria, coldly, "why don't you speak? Perhaps you repent your folly?"

"I don't repent my answer to Dr. Leech," said Belle, cheerfully. "I believe in the Prayer-book, Miss Strong, and that expressly forbids a woman to marry her grandfather."

"Impertinent child!" cried Miss Strong. "Your levity will not spare you. My sister and I have decided we cannot retain beneath our roof anyone whose example to our pupils would be so pernicious."

"Is Dr. Leech going to propose to all the girls?" demanded Belle, wickedly. "Silence!" said Miss Maria, coming to her sister's aid. "We totally disapprove of you, Arabella Forest, and we mean you to leave here."

"My name is Isobel," corrected the offender. Then she added, very gravely, "Miss Strong, I am very sorry. I still think I was right to refuse to marry a man fifty years older than myself; but it was wrong of me to seem to jest about it. Forgive me, and let me stay. You know I need never meet Dr. Leech, and—"

"He would never be able to come to the house for fear of meeting you," said the lady principal, severely. "No, Belle, you must leave here; but as you seem a little repentant, and I have no wish to be hard on anyone, I will pay your fare to London and allow you to refer to me. I am quite ready to testify to your good temper and abilities; of your moral conduct I can say but little, still, I might abstain from referring to that."

Belle glanced from one to the other, saw her cause was hopeless and gave up the battle. She had humbled herself once in vain; she was not the sort of girl to go on pleading when she knew her prayer would be refused.

"When am I to go?" she asked, quietly.

"Really, Belle, your recklessness is terrible. You deserve to be sent off to-night, but it is a long journey from Bournhill to London, and I do not approve of young people travelling at night. You will leave to-morrow by the ten o'clock train. You will have time to send a wire to your father to tell him to expect you."

Isobel made no answer. She walked out of the room without another word, and went straight upstairs to the little attic of which she was allowed the sole use; here she threw herself on the narrow bed, and wept as though her very heart would break.

St. Alban's House was a large, old-fashioned building. It had originally been the home of an old county family; the Misses Strong had it on a long lease, and hoped to purchase it eventually; it was tolerably cheerful when all the girls were there to fill it with noise and life, but at holiday times it was a dreary sort of place, and—the maids declared—quiet enough to scare you.

It did not seem much to lose the chance of spending Christmas in this small north-country town, where she had not a single relative or friend, yet Belle Forest was bitterly sorry for her dismissal, and dreaded above all things the thought of the next month or six weeks. She could hardly, under the most favourable circumstances, get another situation before the end of January, and what was to become of her meanwhile?

In her pocket even now was a letter from her stepmother, not unkindly meant but yet dismal enough. Things were so bad it was impossible to send Belle even a few shillings for dress and pocket-money; she must manage with what she had, or ask Miss Strong; surely as she had no salary she would have a small Christmas-box from her employer. And then followed a plain hint that in that case half of it would be very acceptable in Elizabeth-street.

Isobel groaned as she thought of that letter.

"We really are an unlucky family," she reflected. "Papa's nothing to do, well that's not so unusual. It seems to me people have given up taking drawing lessons; but for the children to catch whooping cough and scare away the lodgers does seem piling up the agony. Poor little things! they would be glad enough to have me to help them spend Christmas, but I can't do it. Mother would insist on knowing why I had been sent home in disgrace, and if I told her she would disapprove of me quite as much as Miss Strong does. No, whatever happens, I can't go home. But what am I to do? I can't possibly get a situation, and I've no friends to invite me unless I go to Dick's people. Shall I do that? It's rather a far cry from Bournhill to Devonshire. I wonder what Miss Strong would say if I told her about Dick?" and a strangely softened expression crossed Belle's face.

Old Dr. Leech was not her only lover. She and Dick Fraser had been boy and girl together, and Dick had gone out to South Africa to make a home for her. Belle did not mind the waiting; she had not the least desire to be married; she was dimly conscious there was something wanting in her own feelings for Dick, that her sisterly affection was not perhaps what he desired; but Belle was of a hopeful nature, and imagined it would all come right by-and-by. Her love affairs occupied far less of her attention than the awful problem how to dispose of herself for the next month without preying on the very narrow purse at home.

Belle unlocked her desk and fell to counting over her small stock of money. It was very small, but larger than one might have expected knowing she had no salary. Isobel Forest possessed a godfather, an old bachelor, who, if not rich was at least comfortably off, and he, hearing of her leaving home for a situation, had come to bid her good-bye, and slipped a crisp bank-note into her hand.

Of that five pounds rather more than three remained. Would it be sufficient to keep her till she found employment, and would Miss Strong's reference be sufficiently favourable to help her to a new situation?

"Why, bless me, Miss Forest!" cried the housemaid's cheery voice, as she came in to turn down the bed, "you'll be starved with cold sitting up here, and supper's just on ready."

"I don't want any supper, Jane. I'm going away to-morrow, and I want to pack up."

"Well, if ever! There, I did always say the missis was an old cat. But, Miss Forest, supper you shall have. I'll get cook to give me something and bring it up on a tray myself, and if you must pack I'll just put a bit of fire in your grate. Miss Strong herself said you was to have a bit for Christmas-eve. You must just think it's come a day too soon. She do think a deal of Christmas, queer as she is."

"I hate Christmas!" said Belle, passionately; "it's the most wretched time of all the year if people are poor."

"Now, don't say that, Miss Forest," said the maid, good-humouredly, "for I have Christmas best of all the year, and I always feels it brings luck with it."

"It never brought me any," said Belle, sadly, her bright spirits had quite deserted her, and a very few words would have broken her down and reduced her to another fit of tears.

"But it will some day, miss," declared Jane; "there's the choir boys a-singing carols down the street now, and there's not a house in Bournhill, however poor the folks is, that won't put up holly and green stuff to-morrow. Missis has ordered a lot. Oh, Christmas is a fine time, if you'd only think so."

Jane was as good as her word. She brought up a plate of hot sausages and mashed potatoes, she kindled the fire and left a whole bucket of coals (Bournhill was only ten miles from the mines, so coal was not costly), and then she wished Miss Forest good-night, bidding her not to tire herself but to go to bed early.

Nothing was further from Belle's thoughts than sleep; she meant to do all her packing, and then write some letters, notably one to Dick; but first she thought she might indulge herself with ten minutes' rest by the fire, and she drew her old wicker chair close up to the fender that she might enjoy the blaze; but the strain of excitement had left her weak and tired out, the heat of the fire made her drowsy, and before Belle knew she was in any danger of falling asleep she was in a deep slumber.

And in that slumber all her fears for the future, all her anxieties for daily bread seemed to have departed. She saw herself the mistress of a beautiful house, admired, flattered, with heaps of friends, and more money than she could spend; and when she asked some one who stood by her what the place was called and why she was there, they stared at her in surprise, and said it was her own home. There was a wedding-ring on her finger, and while she was marvelling by what wonderful chance Dick could possibly have become master of such a splendid property, she awoke to find herself sitting cold and cramped before the grey ashes of the fire, her one candle fast expiring in its socket. It was hopeless to attempt to pack. Belle got to bed as soon as she possibly could, and as the candle, after a frantic splutter, finally expired, her dark head rested safely on the pillow, and the hour of twelve rang out from the old church tower. Christmas-eve had begun!

CHAPTER II.

MISS STRONG herself escorted Belle to the station. Whether she expected that erring young person to play her a trick and remain at Bournhill, or whether she deemed it her duty to Mr. Forest to put his daughter safely into the train, she did not say, but, grim and stern as a gaoler, she drove at Belle's side through the steep winding High-treet, the shaky old cab getting to the station quite half-an-hour too soon! She took the girl's ticket—third class, of course—saw her into an empty compartment, and asked the guard to "have an eye to her;" then, having done her duty to the utmost limit, she retired from the scene without one word of kindly farewell, one good wish for the lonely little creature she was sending away in disgrace.

Left alone, Belle put her head out of the window and proceeded to watch the busy scene with some enjoyment. She might be going back like a "bad penny," she might have sundry rash resolutions floating through her brain of not going to Elizabeth-street at all, but betaking herself to some cheap boarding-house, and trying to get a situation before her slender means were quite exhausted; but, anyway, she could do nothing till she had left Bournhill, and she might as well amuse herself by looking at the cheerful bustle going on around her. It came on her quite as a shock when she heard her own name, and seemed to meet the face of a very pretty girl whom she knew slightly from the fact of her sisters being day pupils at St. Alban's House.

"Miss Cleaver! Are you going to London?"

Nancy Cleaver took Belle's hand, and gave it a little squeeze, as though to enjoin her silence; then she turned to the tall, angular lady beside her, and said demurely,—

"This is one of Miss Strong's teachers, mother. I am sure she will let me travel under her charge since you are so anxious about me."

Mrs. Cleaver looked at Belle grimly. She thought her nearly as young and frivolous as her daughter, but since Miss Strong had a great fame in Bournhill as a martinet for the proprietors, her teacher must be trusted, so finally the good lady began,—

"I should really be grateful, Miss—ahem!—Forest if you would have the kindness to look after my daughter. She will be met at Ardley, if you will keep an eye on her till then."

Belle had a great difficulty in keeping serious. Miss Cleaver was more than a head taller than herself, and two years older, but as she liked what she had seen of Nancy very much, she was glad to have a companion, and agreed to all the angular lady said with such amiability that the latter shook hands with her and wished her "A happy Christmas." "Not a merry one, my dear. I don't believe in noise and boisterous amusement." The whistle sounded, the train was off, and would not stop again for an hour, when the two girls would have to change trains at Darlington.

"Well, this is luck. I never was so glad of anything in my life as of meeting you. It's the best thing that could have happened for me, Miss Forest, your being in this train."

"I'm afraid it is not at all the best thing for myself," said Belle, a little sadly. "I don't think your mother would have let you travel with me if she had known that Miss Strong had sent me away."

"Good gracious!" Miss Cleaver looked genuinely startled. "Why, I

thought you were such a success, and all the girls liked you. I am sure our chicks rave about you."

"I think the girls like me, but—Miss Strong and her sister can't bear me."

"And what does Dr. Leech say to your going? Do you know, Miss Forest, every one at Bournhill says you are to marry him."

"I am not!" and something in her abrupt pause and her blushing face told Nancy the truth. She put out her hand kindly.

"Well, I think you were wise to say 'No.' Fancy being tied to one's grandfather."

"I am sure I was right to say 'No,' but I wish Miss Strong had not sent me away."

"Why, it can't be a bed of roses to be one of her teachers, and now you will get a real Christmas at home."

"I would much rather not—I mean my father is poor, and there are so many of us; another one is only a burden. I would do almost anything in the world if only I could get another situation before I meet my step-mother."

"Would you really? Miss Forest, I believe I could help you to one."

"You?"

"I. Have you the least idea why I am being hurried away from home on Christmas-eve?"

"I thought perhaps you were going on a visit."

"I am going to a situation. Oh, you need not look so surprised. My father is only a struggling lawyer, and he has six daughters, you must know," and Nancy smiled; "my sisters are painfully plain. You can answer for the two at St. Alban's House, and the others are even worse. Mother has pinned all her hopes on me; she considers me 'tolerably good looking,' and means me to marry a rich man."

"And shall you?"

"Most assuredly not. I have had the audacity to fall in love with a poverty-stricken young man. We have undergone a lot of persecution, but it did not make much impression on us. However, lately papa has taken to bring one of his rich clients home; and after a long time it dawned on me Mr. Kendal did not come for the sake of the weak tea and thick bread-and-butter with which we regaled him, but for the sake of my superior attractions. He was a good fellow. I didn't want him to waste his affections on me, so I just told him about Guy. He's gone abroad on a long voyage, and mother is so furious with me. She's simply stood over me every morning and insisted on my answering every advertisement in the London papers she chose to select. Why, Miss Forest, you'd never guess the posts I've volunteered to fill. I've offered to be anything from a rent collector to a photographer's assistant, and at last, after a lavish expenditure of my time and mother's stamps, I've got a situation, and I've started for it to-day."

"And you don't like the idea?"

"I should hate it if I intended going, but I do not. I told you just now, Miss Forest, it was lucky my meeting you. I have no intention of going to Ardley. Guy will meet the train at Darlington, and in less than an hour I shall be his wife. Now, if mother had confided me to the care of any very stern mistress, just think what a fuss there would be!"

"But she is sure to find out."

"I doubt it. We are to be married by license, and the clergyman is a friend of Guy's, and will keep his own counsel. I have not the least intention of telling my family of my marriage until a few months have passed. I told mother I shouldn't write to her for ages, and she replied she had no wish to hear from a disobedient, headstrong girl."

"But—won't the people at Ardley write when you don't arrive?"

"I meant to telegraph to Lady Danver from Darlington, but since I have been with you another idea has struck me. Why should you not go to her in my stead?"

A strange light shone in Belle's dark eyes at the suggestion. Her longing not to be a burden at home was so intense that she was ready to make any sacrifice rather than return to Elizabeth-street.

"Will you tell me how I could? I mean—would not Lady Danver find out the deception?"

Nancy Cleaver looked grave.

"She might in time. What I meant was that you should go to her now and stay till you had found something else. She is rather peculiar, I think. I was engaged for 'a month on trial,' just like a general servant. Before the month was over most schools will begin again, so if you were not comfortable at Ardley you could get a fresh situation."

"I wonder what a companion has to do?"

"Write letters, drive out with her employer, and make herself generally agreeable," replied Nancy.

"Lady Danver is a widow, and I fancy enormously rich; she offered me a hundred a year. Papa looked the Danvers up in the peerage, and discovered she had been married twice. Her two husbands were cousins, and as she had no children by her second marriage, her son by Captain Danver succeeded his stepfather. It sounds rather mixed, doesn't it? The present Earl is under thirty, and not married. I believe my mother has built wonderful castles in the air about him, but I've tried in vain to impress on her it's only in novels companions are treated as heroines; but still, Miss Forest, if you could go to Ardley for a month I don't expect you'd find life there any worse than life at St. Alban's House."

Belle had to make up her mind quickly, for they were at Darlington, and if she declined the proffered chance, Miss Cleaver must telegraph the excuses to Lady Danver. There was no time to hesitate, her choice must be made at once; she turned to Nancy,—

"I should like to go!"

"You are quite sure?"

"Yes."

After all, Belle tried to assure herself she was wronging no one; she was as well born, as gently mannered as Nancy Cleaver. She was quite as competent to fulfil the duties of Lady Danver's companion.

"You have half an hour to wait for the Ardley train," said Nancy; "but I'm afraid I can't stay to see you off. You must get the label on your box changed or it will be taken on to London, and I'll give you Lady Danver's letters—I had only two altogether—which will tell you as much as I know about her. Oh, there is Guy! Miss Forest, I do wish you could come to my wedding!"

But this was impossible, though Guy Tempest, a very pleasant young fellow, himself endorsed the invitation. Belle had to say good-bye to the pair of lovers very quickly. They both shook hands with her very warmly.

"You must come and see us one of these days, Miss Forest," said Guy cheerfully. "I expect Nan has told you we are a couple of paupers, but we mean to be very happy!"

"I am sure you will be," and Belle smiled, wondering a little sadly the while why Dick's presence had never given her the perfect happiness which shone now on Nancy's face.

Left alone at the station with her solitary tin box in front of her, Belle took out Lady Danver's letters and read them very carefully; they were very short, and yet they were to the point. Lady Danver wrote that she had been so unfortunate in her late companions, she had resolved on engaging the next only for a month on trial. For this time she would pay ten guineas, and if she and Miss Cleaver eventually suited each other, she offered a salary of a hundred a year. She required some one musical and able to read aloud well, but no other accomplishments.

"Well," and Isobel's heart gave a great bound; "surely I can do that. The situation sounds just made for me, and if only I can keep it, how I shall be able to help father! If Lady Danver is nice it won't be very difficult to tell her the truth; but of course I must be Miss Cleaver at first. How odd it will sound!"

On the strength of her brilliant prospects, little Belle treated herself to quite a nice little lunch at Darlington, and when the train came up she found a friendly porter, who told her she would have to change again at Grangemere, a station a good way south of York.

"Ardley's only a local line; none of the London trains stop there; but you won't have long to wait at Grangemere; we're due there at four."

He was quite right. The short local train was waiting when they reached Grangemere; and in less than half an hour poor Belle, her courage rapidly oozing out at her finger tips, found herself alighting at a very small country station, and wondering how in the world she was to find her way to Ardley Court.

It was a pretty little place, seen even in the dusk of a winter's afternoon. The porters had found time to decorate the station lavishly with holly and evergreens; while in the little booking-office "Merry Christmas" greeted each arrival in huge red letters on a white ground, supposed to be snow. A huge fire burned there, but there was no trace of passengers. No one but Belle had alighted at Ardley, and so when the porter on duty had taken out her box and dismissed the departing train, he came up to her and touched his cap.

"Rectory, Miss?"

"No," Belle flushed crimson. "I am going to Lady Danver's. Can you tell me how far it is to Ardley Court?"

"A matter of seven miles, Miss. They mostly sends down. The dog-cart's in the town this afternoon, for I saw it go by. I can run up and try to find it, if you like. You'd never be able to walk there, and there ain't a fly to be had for love or money in Ardley on Christmas-eve."

There was nothing for it but to accept the porter's offer, but after all he was spared his journey. A fleet horse's step was heard, and a dog-cart with bright red wheels came dashing up to the station, while a hearty voice called out,—

"Hy! there. Any parcels for the Court?"

"There's no parcels, my lord," said Dobbs, respectfully; "but there's a young lady."

Belle heard something muttered, which sounded very like "the devil there is," then Lord Danver flung the reins to his groom, sprang down, and entered the little station.

"Miss Cleaver, I think," and he raised his hat courteously. "I am afraid there is some mistake; my mother intended sending the brougham for you. If you can manage to climb into a high dog-cart I will take you home in a canter; I'm afraid you will find it rather cold, yet I don't like to leave you here till I can send back the carriage."

Belle saw a tall, soldierly-looking man, with well-cut, clearly-finished features, close-cropped black hair, and large bright blue eyes. It was a very handsome face, but there was a shadow of sadness over it, as though Lord Danver found life on the whole a very bothering thing.

"I would rather go with you," said Belle simply; "I am not afraid!"

"Come along, then. My mare's fresh and won't stand long."

With great difficulty Belle clambered to her seat, but for the undignified nature of the request she would have begged the loan of a chair from the friendly porter; but she was there, at last. Lord Danver took the reins, and they were dashing along at a pace which seemed as though it must result in an accident.

For some time Lord Danver was silent, perhaps the fiery horse required all his attention, but as they turned at last out of the little town into a broad country road, bordered on either side by tall hedges, he relaxed his pace, and was able to turn his attention to his companion.

"I'm afraid you've had a long journey," he said, pleasantly; "my mother made a point of your coming to-day, though I told her it was cruelty to tear you away from home before Christmas. We think a great deal of Christmas at Ardley, Miss Cleaver."

Belle blushed. She felt sure she always should blush when called by that name.

"I was very glad to come," she said, slowly, "and we gathered Lady Danver had been without a companion for some time."

"A month to-day. She has been somewhat unfortunate lately."

He said no more. Perhaps he was not a great talker. Belle thought privately he was very dull. She began to be afraid his manner had been too familiar, and that the Earl was trying to snub her by his silence; but at last, as they passed through the lodge gates, and turned into the avenue leading to the Court, he said, suddenly,—

"I hope you will be comfortable with us, Miss Cleaver. My mother is not very strong, and cannot always attend to things. If there is any difficulty, will you bring it to me? and I will do my best to set it right."

Belle promised, wondering the while at the hidden pain in his manner; that Lord Danver had some terrible trouble weighing heavily on him she felt certain; also that, for some reason or other, the Earl considered it probable she would not be comfortable at the Court. Never in all her life had Belle seen such a place as the hall at Ardley. The huge oaken door opened straight into a square vestibule, which led through glass doors into the hall itself; the walls were panelled half way to the ceiling in dark oak, beautifully carved; above this were various trophies of sport, showing that the Earls of Danver had been good shots and valiant huntmen; one table was covered with papers and magazines, another was furnished with everything necessary for correspondence. A manservant came forward with a message from Lady Danver—she would like to see Miss Cleaver at once.

"Is my mother alone, Hicks?" asked the Earl.

"Well, my lord, I did hear that Mrs. Warren was with the Countess; she came in this afternoon, just after you started."

An angry frown crossed the Earl's face, but he only said, quietly,—

"I will introduce you to my mother myself, Miss Cleaver, and then, I am sure, you will be glad of some tea—we dine at eight."

Belle followed him up a broad oaken staircase where her feet seemed literally to sink into the rich, soft carpet. He stopped at a door, before which velvet curtains were closely drawn, pushed them aside, and entered.

"I have brought you Miss Cleaver, mother; I found her at the station, waiting like a parcel to be called for. I understood you the brougham would meet her."

There were two ladies in the pretty room—one, in rich black satin, with a square of soft cowbeby lace over her splendid hair, Belle took for the Countess; the other, a little dark-eyed woman in a thick woollen dress, poke bonnet, and long dark cloak, had apparently been paying a call, but it was she who answered Lord Danver.

"I am the culprit, dear Geoffrey. My girls wanted sadly to go into town to do some Christmas shopping, and I came over to ask their kind aunt for the loan of the carriage."

"I meant to have told you, Geoff," said his mother, and her voice sounded weak and rather querulous. "I hope you did not have to wait very long, Miss Cleaver."

"Only a few minutes, thank you," replied Belle; but the little dark-eyed woman interposed,—

"I directed the girls to call at the station when they had finished their shopping. This young person could have waited there quite conveniently until they were ready."

Lord Danver's blue eyes blazed with passion. Belle's wounded feelings were simply forgotten in her surprise at his anger.

"I keep my carriages for the convenience of my guests!" he said, coldly, to Mrs. Warren, "not for the caprices of your daughters. Perhaps you will kindly remember this in future!"

There was a look in Mrs. Warren's eyes not good to see as she heard the reproach.

"Ah, well! poor relations must expect to be slighted," she said, mournfully; "but, Lord Danver, pride may have a fall some day. Meanwhile, I wish you and your guest a very merry Christmas!"

The Earl drew a sigh of relief as the door closed on her, and, to Belle's amazement, his mother echoed it. It seemed as though the departure of her visitor roused her to a sense of hospitality, for she rang to order tea for Miss Cleaver, asked about her journey, and seemed altogether transformed. When Belle followed the maid who was summoned to show her the way to her own room, she felt it would be quite possible to like the Countess after all.

"Mother!"

It was the Earl who spoke. As soon as they were alone he croaked the room to Lady Danver's side, and took her hand.

"Mother, won't you grant my wish, and show a little firmness? It is not right you should be a cypher in your own house. That woman grows more odious every day."

"She is my own sister, Geoffrey; she is a widow and poor; therefore, she has every claim on me."

"Look here, mother," said Geoffrey; "since my stepfather died, seven years ago, Mrs. Warren has been the curse of this house, and of our own peace; she may be your own sister, and my aunt, but she is the most arrant mischief maker I ever met. She seems, by turns, cringing and threatening, while her daughters are girls I feel positively ashamed to own as kinswomen. Why can't you do as I implore you, and give them all the cold shoulder?"

Lady Danver raised her eyes to her son's face, and Geoffrey's heart ached, for it seemed to him there was something of terror in their expression; try as he would to banish the idea, there were times when he believed his mother's extreme submission to her sister came as much from fear as love.

"Poor Jane has no one but me," said the Countess, timidly; "you would not have me unkind to her?"

"Mrs. Warren was a widow long before she came here," said Geoffrey,

rather coldly. "I have heard my stepfather speak as though he heartily disliked her, and certainly in his lifetime she never entered the Court. It seems to me a trifle odd that you sent for her as soon as he was dead."

"I did not send for her—she came. You know the accident which killed my husband was in all the papers. She read it, and rushed here to comfort me. You were at the ends of the world—I had no one but Jane."

Poor Lord Danver! When at twenty-two he took his degree and left Oxford, his stepfather proposed that he should take a six months' tour round the world. The peer was then barely sixty, hale and hearty; it never entered into his head his wife might need her son, and so his death was six weeks' old when Geoffrey heard of it. He was then in India, and though he hurried home by the next steamer, when he reached Ardley he found his Aunt Jane established at the Court as his mother's guide, philosopher, and friend.

There was no will; the late Earl had lived fully up to his income, and, his property being entailed, there would have been but little to leave. His wife had the moderate jointure of five hundred a year, and the use of the town house by her settlements—the last was let on a long lease to an excellent tenant, but Lady Danver much preferred to reside with her son, and the only bone of contention between them was Mrs. Warren.

Young as he was, the Earl was a good judge of character. He disliked and distrusted his aunt, and, after many discussions with his mother, issued his decree—he would not have Mrs. Warren as an inmate of his home. He did not gain very much, for she promptly took a house in the village, and Geoffrey knew that she spent part of every day with his mother.

He appointed an excellent agent, in whom he could place every confidence, and then, within eighteen months of his stepfather's death, he went abroad again. He was passionately fond of travelling, and spent five years without visiting England even for a day; he might have delayed his return longer still only he received a mysterious letter from his agent.

"At the risk of being thought impertinent," wrote Mr. Harris, "I must tell you things are going on very badly at the Court. Lady Danver seems in very delicate health, and all domestic authority rests in her sister's hands. Old servants are dismissed, village charities curtailed—the most rigid economy practised in every department at the Court. Everyone is marvelling whether it can be by your orders, as it is known you have spared no expense in any improvement on the property, and are a generous landlord. The people cannot understand things. If you would come home for a short time you would see more in a day than I could write of in a week."

Lord Danver was at Paris when he got Mr. Harris's letter, and he started for home at once, driving up to the Court in a hired fly on a bright June evening. He found his agent had not exaggerated things, and he was deeply hurt and grieved at the deeds done in his name.

With his mother he could not be angry, she looked so frail and ill. He had one serious conversation with her, in which he told her for his own credit's sake there must be a change. If she remained with him it must be simply as a guest. All the domestic economy of his house would be in the hands of a hired housekeeper.

Lady Danver burst into tears.

"You think I have robbed you, Geoff. Why, I would give my life for you."

Lord Danver did not remind her of the liberal sum allowed her for household expenses. He only said she would be happier if she had only her own affairs to see to. She began some complaint about a miserable pittance, but Geoffrey, knowing everything she had only enriched the Warrens, did not offer to increase her income.

He remained at home. The housekeeper was honest; she understood her master's wishes, and carried them out. The Rector found in Lord Danver a generous helper for every case of need. Friends and neighbours who had deserted the Court under the late régime began to come to it again. The young Earl was winning for himself golden opinions everywhere; but Geoffrey was not happy. His anxiety about his mother increased day by day; he was certain she was unhappy, and yet she refused to confide in him.

The doctor advised cheerful society, and Lady Danver confessed she often felt dull and she should like a companion. The first one selected was recommended by Mrs. Warren, and was discovered eavesdropping at the door of Lord Danver's study. Needless to say, she left at the end of a month. The next, a widow, was so meek and depressed that she seemed more like a wet blanket than anything else. Number three was not a lady, and felt hopelessly out of place at the Court. Lord Danver was almost in despair, and finally inserted an advertisement in the *Times*, selected the shortest letter of the two hundred which poured in, persuaded his mother to write to Miss Cleaver, and devoutly hoped she would prove more successful than her predecessors.

He waited five or ten minutes after his last appeal to his mother, but she did not speak. Evidently she was obtinate in her resolve to cling to her sister at all hazards. Geoffrey rose to go to his dressing-room.

"Look here, mother, you must do one thing for me. Don't let Mrs. Warren tyrannise over Miss Cleaver. The girl's a lady, and I desire her to be treated properly."

"I was very sorry about the brougham, Geoffrey, but Jane said it would be sure to get to the station in time. I like Miss Cleaver's face, it is so frank."

"That's right, old lady," said Geoffrey, cheerily. "Just rouse yourself up and enjoy a little bright society, and you'll feel ten years younger. You're coming down to dinner to night!"

"I feel very tired."

"Oh, nonsense, mother; it's Christmas-eve. You must come. Remember I have not been at home at Christmas for six long years, the waits and carol singers are sure to come round, and what would they say if you were not downstairs to hear them?"

"I'll make an effort, then, and come to please you, Geoffrey. If only you would be sensible, dear boy, and find a better chataleine than your poor old mother."

The Earl left her. He met the housekeeper on the stairs, and paused to say,—

"I hope you'll do your best to make Miss Cleaver comfortable, Mrs. Hicks. The doctor lays great stress on my mother having cheerful society, and this is a sorry house for a bright young girl."

"I'll see to it, my lord. I beg your pardon, but Hicks wished me to ask if you knew the family from the cottage were coming up to dinner to-morrow?"

"No;" his brow darkened, "it's a mistake—I mean they are not coming. And look here, Mrs. Hicks, just send word to the stables that none of the carriages are to be taken out at Mrs. Warren's orders."

"Yes, my lord. She went into the conservatory this afternoon and cut a large basket of camellias. James was sadly put out, for he'd counted on making a show with them at the ball."

Lord Danver groaned.

"Look here! For the future try and make every servant in my employ understand that Mrs. Warren has no more authority here than a stranger. If she did not get flowers, fruit and game, butter, milk, and vegetables from here, perhaps she would not be so pleased with Ardley."

Mrs. Hicks nodded, then she passed on to the pretty little room allotted to the new companion, knocked at the door, and entered.

"Can I do anything for you, Miss Cleaver—is there anything I can get you?"

Belle was a little awed by this offer coming from a silk-robed housekeeper. But, in spite of poverty, the girl had a high-born air which always impressed servants, and Mrs. Hicks was as respectful as though the shabby grenadine had been a confection of Worth's.

"Would you tell me, please, whether I ought to go to the drawing-room or back to Lady Danver, and do you know at all what sort of things she likes done for her? I never was a companion before"—and the girl blushed crimson—"so I don't quite know."

"The first gong rings at ten minutes to eight," said Mrs. Hicks, promptly. "I'll be back then and show you the way to the drawing-room. As to the other questions, miss—have you a mother?"

"Not of my own. I have a stepmother."

"Ah! Well, the things my lady needs are just the little attentions a mother likes from her daughter. She is not strong, Miss Cleaver, and she wants cheering up. Only try to keep her bright and interested, and you'll be doing all that's needed."

"Has she any daughters of her own?"

"Not one. I knew her when she was just Mrs. Danver, a pretty young widow, and I was glad enough when my master, the late lord, married her and brought her here. Till he died, Miss Cleaver, Ardley Court was just the happiest home you could believe. But there's been a shadow on my lady ever since. The present Earl came home last summer chiefly on that account, but though it's seven years turned since her husband died, Lady Danver has never recovered her spirits."

"And have you lived here ever since she was married?"

"And longer than that. I was nurse to Lady Isobel, Lord Danver's only child. When she grew up I was her maid; after her death, when the Countess came home, I was transferred to her. It's only the last few months I've been the housekeeper; till then my lady liked to see to things herself. I'll go now, Miss Cleaver, and perhaps you'll get a rest; there's an hour before the gong sounds. I do hope you'll be comfortable and feel at home with us. It's so long since we had a young lady here."

"I thought Lady Danver had had several companions?" hazarded Belle.

"She's had three, miss; but two of them were no more ladies than I am. The other was a lady right enough, poor dear, but she'd turned fifty and wanted cheering up herself."

CHAPTER III.

BELLE had a nap on the cretonne sofa by the fire, and when Mrs. Hicks came in to call her she found the new companion sleeping as peacefully as a little child; the good woman stood and watched her for a moment, and then brushed a tear out of her eyes.

"I hope they won't see it, but then, how should they? My lord was only a little boy when I lost my sweet young lady, and the Countess was very seldom here in those days; it's not likely they'll see that this stranger is as like my Lady Isobel as though she'd been her own child. Well, I may be a foolish old woman to think much of a likeness, but I'll not let Mrs. Warren drive Miss Cleaver away if I can help it."

Belle opened her eyes in dismay.

"Oh, I hope it is not late, it must be the long drive in the open air that made me so sleepy."

"It's not late, Miss Cleaver, but my lady has gone down and I think you'll like to be in the drawing-room when the second gong rings."

"Are there many people staying here?"

The housekeeper paused and looked at Belle.

"There's not been a visitor in this house, to stay, for seven long years, Miss Cleaver, barring the Earl's lawyer and a few gentlemen for the shooting; you see, my lady's health has never been good."

"Does Mrs. Warren live near here?"

"Just in the village street, Miss Cleaver. You may think I've no right to tell you, but I must do it. Beware of that woman and her daughters!"

"I felt quite frightened of her," said Belle, simply, "and I'm sure she won't want to know me; she called me 'that young person.'"

"Ah, it's just like her. It'd be a happy day for Ardley if she would leave the place, but there's no chance of it."

Belle found the Earl and Countess both in the drawing-room when she entered it; skilful hands had been busy with the room, hot-house flowers lent their beauty to its adornment, but the Christmas evergreens and holly were there, too, while on the hearth a yule log was burning.

"We keep up old customs, you see," said Geoffrey, smiling, "and after dinner we go into the hall and listen to the carols and play games just like children."

Lady Danver looked up suddenly.

"They won't come this year, Geoffrey; the carol singers always go to the Rectory now."

"They'll come, mother, and the Rector too; he promised to bring his wife and daughters. It would be selfish to keep all the musical genius of Ardley to ourselves."

Dinner was very different to the meal which went by that name at St. Alban's House. Belle thought it more like a banquet than a quiet family repast, but it was over at last, and soon after the dessert was on the table, Hicks appeared with a broad smile on his cheerful face.

"They're coming, my lord; they've passed the lodge-gates, and the Rector's here."

Lord Danver gave his arm to his mother and led her into the hall; the furniture had been cleared out and a few rout seats provided, while at the further end a buffet had been arranged which literally groaned under the burden of good things. Mr. Tilt, a benevolent, white-haired clergyman, with a plump, rosy wife and two daughters, younger editions of herself, greeted Lady Danver with a strange mixture of friendliness and constraint, as though not quite sure of their welcome, but the Countess beamed on them most hospitably.

"I am so glad to see you here; it seems like the good old times come back. Let me introduce you to my young friend, Miss Cleaver."

The twins made room for Belle between them and smiled on her in a little way peculiarly their own. They had pretty cooing voices, not unlike pet doves, and Belle's heart went out to them at once.

Hicks flung open the door and the choir of Ardley Church appeared—about thirty men and women, boys and maidens, all in their gala attire, for this yearly visit to the Court had once been the great event of their lives, and the fact that for six long years it had dropped into disuse only made the present occasion more memorable.

The conductor—a little, bent old man, whose worldly calling was making shoes—speedily got his troupes into order and they began:—

"The blasts of chill December sound
The farewell of the year;
And night's swift shadows gathering round,
O'ercloud the soul with fear.
But rest you well, good Christian men,
Nor be of heart forlorn,
December's darkness brings again,
The Light of Christmas morn."

On they went through the six long verses, but it was these two lines which lingered in Belle's heart like a sweet, sad refrain:—

"December's darkness brings again,
The Light of Christmas morn."

Certainly last night had seemed dark enough to her, but with the coming of Christmas-tide hope had dawned in her heart; she thought of her anxious fears of adding to the troubles at home, her feverish plans for hiding herself somewhere in some cheap boarding-house till she had found another situation, and lo! she had stepped almost without effort into a comfortable post where she would be able to help her father and—

Mary Tilt's voice at her elbow brought Belle back to the present.

"That is my favourite carol," she said, "yet we very seldom have it, people think it gloomy."

"I like it very much. I never heard it before."

"Which is your favourite carol, Miss Cleaver?"

"I—I never heard any except King Wenceslas, and the one about three ships, the street-boys come round and shout those two till one is almost deafened; but I never heard carols really sung till now."

"Miss Cleaver," said Lord Danver, who had overheard this, "your remark is such a compliment to Rufus Green that I shall make a point of repeating it to him, and he will be your bondsman for ever. But don't you have carol singing in the North?"

Belle flushed crimson. Of course the *real* Miss Cleaver had spent all her life within hail of Newcastle. It had been on her lips to say she had never spent a Christmas in the North, but she remembered just in time.

"I have never been in the way of it," she said, gravely.

"You must feel dull to-night," said Mary Tilt, kindly. "It seems so hard to have to come among strangers on Christmas-eve. I wonder you did not write to Lady Danver and tell her she must wait a week."

"I was only too glad to come," said Belle.

"Well," and it was gentle, motherly Mrs. Tilt who spoke now, "certainly you are badly wanted here, and remember, my dear, when you feel dull or have a little spare time, we shall be glad to see you at the Rectory. I am very fond of young people."

The carols were over and the choir partaking of refreshment; then Lord Danver stationed himself at the door and shook hands with each of the singers as they passed out, and each one found some present left in their hand ranging in amount and character from a sovereign and a tin of tobacco for Rufus Green to a half-crown and wonderful pocket-knife for his grandson, the

youngest member of the choir. The Tilts soon took their leave. Belle began to wonder if she ought to leave the mother and son alone. She was sitting at a little distance from the Countess, who seemed lost in a reverie; suddenly she started up with a bitter cry,—

"Do your worst, I am not afraid! Geoffrey will take care of me."

Belle looked at Lord Danver with a mute inquiry, and then crossed to his mother's side.

"I think you are dreaming," she said gently, laying her cool slim hand on Lady Danver's. "It is getting very late, and the singing is all over. Wouldn't you like to go to bed?"

Lord Danver watched the new companion with intense thankfulness. He felt there would be someone to share his heavy burdens at last.

"I will wait a little longer," said the Countess. "I must hear the Christmas bells before I go."

"Most of the singers are in the choir," said the Earl, "and they go straight from here to the church to 'ring in Christmas Day.' It is a very old custom here."

Belle lifted her beautiful eyes to his face with a puzzled expression.

"How much you think of Christmas."

"Don't you?"

"I—I don't know. At home it always seems sadder than the rest of the year, I think," she said, speaking as freely as though he had been an old friend. "Poor people can't enjoy Christmas; it means so many bills coming in, and they feel being poor extra when everyone is rejoicing."

"I daresay," agreed Geoffrey, gently, "but, Miss Cleaver, believe me there are far worse trials in the world than poverty."

Perhaps his ear had caught the sound of the bells, for he moved quietly to the door and flung it open. Lady Danver laid her trembling hand on Belle's arm, and together they passed out on to the terrace steps. The sky was bright with thousands of stars, the soft silvery moon gave a silvery radiance to the scene, the beautiful grounds looked their loveliest, bathed in that pale moonlight. Lord Danver gave one glance at the picturesque scene, and said half to himself,—

"After all, home is the dearest spot on earth. I wonder I could have stayed away so long;" and then, while the bells still rang out their joyous peal, the three went indoors, and parted for the night.

Belle found that skilful fingers had been busy in her room; her trunk had been unpacked and its contents arranged in the large wardrobe and chest of drawers, where they took up so little of the space provided for them that they rather resembled an island in a remarkably large ocean; but Belle was tired, she had gone through so much in the last twenty-four hours that she was thankful to be spared the trouble of being her own waiting maid. How deliciously warm the room was, how bright and cheerful the furniture was. She thought of her attic at St. Alban's, and the small room she shared with her little sisters in Elizabeth-street, and rejoiced at the contrast; and then, strange thing, her thoughts wandered to the real Nancy Cleaver, or, more correctly, to Mrs. Tempest.

"How happy she looked! Her very face changed when she met him, and how fond he is of her. Well, Dick is fond of me, but I don't think I ever looked like that. Mother always says I have no feelings; perhaps I am one of the girls love passes by. Poor Dick, I hope he won't be sorry."

She went to bed with strangely softened thoughts, but in her dreams the face which haunted her was not her young lover, Dick's, but the dark blue eyes and handsome countenance of Lord Danver.

Belle did not wake till the tardy winter sunshine was pouring into her room. A rosy-cheeked little maid stood by the bedside with a cup of tea.

"Breakfast's at half-past nine, Miss Cleaver, and my aunt sent me to see if I could do anything for you; she's the housekeeper."

But Belle declined. She wanted a little solitude just to think over her position, and try and arrange her bewildered thoughts. Poor little girl, with all her faults—and according to Miss Strong they were legion—she was by nature truthful and open as the day. Yesterday, in her agony at being sent home in disgrace to add to the burdens on her father's shoulders, it had seemed easy enough to take Miss Cleaver's place and deceive Lady Danver as to her identity. What would it matter to the Countess by what name she called her companion? she had argued; but now that Belle was actually at Ardley her feelings had changed strangely. To deceive the gentle lady who seemed already to cling to and depend on her was, she felt, wrong, and poor Belle's very cheeks burned with shame at the thought of Lord Danver learning the fraud.

"I must tell them the truth as soon as I can. I don't think the Countess will be very angry with me."

Not till she was going down stairs did another thought occur to her. Her parents would think her lost; if Miss Strong wrote the story of her misdeeds to Elizabeth-street they would surely fancy some terrible calamity had befallen her.

"Good morning, Miss Cleaver, a merry Christmas to you," fell on her ear.

Belle started. She had reached the dining-room door, and there on the threshold stood the Earl with outstretched hand.

"Thank you very much," she said simply, "I hope Lady Danver is not very tired after last night."

"My mother is breakfasting upstairs," he answered, "so I will ask you to kindly pour out the coffee. I hope she will be able to go to church. This is my first Christmas in England for so long I should like to make a festival of it."

Seen in the strong morning light the sad expression on his face struck Belle more than ever. She was such a bright, joyous-hearted little thing, it came natural to her to cheer up other people, and she set herself to perform that office for the Earl as composedly as though he had been plain Geoffrey

Danver, aged ninety. And she succeeded. That morning meal was probably the brightest he had taken for years in his own house. When it was over he invited Belle into the library.

"I should like you to see my books," he said kindly, "and," with strange hesitation, "there is something I want to say to you."

The library was a beautiful old room, and the sight of its book-lined walls made Belle give a little cry of delight, for she loved reading above all else. Lord Danver smiled, well pleased.

But it was some minutes before he came to what he wished to say, and then it seemed to Belle he paused to weigh his words, as though afraid of saying too much.

"I had rather tell you myself," he began slowly. "You would be sure to hear a rumour of it in the neighbourhood. My mother and I"—he paused again—"have one point of difference. You saw the lady who was here when you arrived yesterday?"

"Mrs. Warren?"

"Yes. She is my mother's only sister—I may say after myself her only near relation. It is not pleasant for a man to speak against his family, Miss Cleaver, but there are reasons why I decline to receive Mrs. Warren or her daughters as my guests. My mother, of course, is free to ask them to visit her in her own apartments, but I can not and will not have them here to meet my friends, and nothing would induce me to break bread with them myself."

Belle trembled as though suddenly frightened; and, indeed, the deep quiet passion which thrilled in every note of Lord Danver's voice was in itself alarming.

"Don't be afraid," said Geoff sadly, "I am not quite an ogre," Miss Cleaver. These people have done me a grievous wrong by obtaining a strange influence over my poor mother, and using it for their own ends. Do you know that when I came home last June I found the grounds almost like a wilderness, because my mother had dismissed the gardeners. Most of the house shut up, and my poor mother herself living in three small rooms, because, she said, she could not afford any servants but Hicks and his wife. All this time the money paid for maintaining the establishment was the same as it had been for years. I can only conclude that Mrs. Warren for her own ends persuaded my mother she was on the high road to ruin, and quietly put in her own purse the sum gained by the extraordinary economy that went on. I believe if I had remained away much longer my name would have been execrated by rich and poor. Thank Heaven I had an honest agent, so the tenants did not suffer, and he at last sent for me."

Belle looked at the Earl in utter bewilderment.

"It sounds like a story in a book!"

"Truth is stranger than fiction, Miss Cleaver. It is a popular delusion money can do everything. Yet I who count my income by thousands am unable to get rid of the Warrens. They have a lease of a little house in the village—a lease, by the way, granted them by my agent at my mother's special request, he, poor man, believing it was my wish, and no powers can get rid of them till the lease expires."

"I wonder—"

"Go on, Miss Cleaver, I assure you I shall not be offended at anything you may say; the skeleton in my house is unfortunately known far and wide."

"I was only going to say if Mrs. Warren is your aunt you must have known her all your life, and—"

He interrupted her.

"I never set eyes on her till after my stepfather's death. He never would receive her here. Looking back, I know she never visited my mother in my own father's lifetime. When Lord Danver died I unfortunately was travelling in the East. It was six weeks before I heard of his loss, and another month before I got home. I found Mrs. Warren literally in possession at the Court, and by fair means or foul she had gained an ascendancy over my mother's mind nothing I have said or done has been able to alter."

"I don't think Lady Danver cares for her," said Belle; "she looked quite relieved when Mrs. Warren went yesterday."

"I am convinced my mother has not one grain of pleasure from the intercourse. She is devoted to me, yet she persists in seeing a great deal of the Warrens, and loading them with presents, knowing how I detest them. There are times, Miss Cleaver, when I am tempted to believe Mrs. Warren has some uncanny power, such as mesmerism or hypnotism, and that she has tried her spells on my poor mother with some effect."

"Oh, I hope not," and Belle shuddered, "it would be too dreadful."

"It would explain a great deal. Miss Cleaver, will you give me your promise never to enter Mrs. Warren's house, and to avoid as much as possible any confidential intercourse between yourself and her family."

"I will, indeed."

"There is one thing more," he hesitated; "they will try to poison my mother's mind against you. I want you to be prepared for this and to bear with her, poor thing, if at times she is irritable and trying."

"I will do my best," promised Belle. "I was so thankful to come here, and I am most anxious to stay. I am the eldest, and there are so many of us, you see."

"I see," he said gently, "that things at home must have been very sad to make you willing to spend Christmas under a stranger's roof; but, Miss Cleaver, as I told you last night, there are far worse troubles than any poverty can bring. Sometimes," he went on in a dreary tone, "it seems to me that when things are at their worst they mend. I like to remember the old carol they sang last night,—

"December's darkness brings again
The light of Christmas morn."

CHAPTER IV.

ARDLEY CHURCH was a good two miles from the Court, and as Lady Danver was a very bad walker they all drove there. It was a very small building, and from the Earl's pew you could see the whole of the congregation, which was rather a pity, Belle thought, when she saw Lady Danver's cheek flush and her son's face darken as three figures passed into a conspicuous seat in the nave. Belle recognised Mrs. Warren, and guessed her companions were her two daughters. She understood the Earl's feelings better when she had seen them. They were quite young, the elder only twenty-four; but already they had that brazen bold look only very fast women wear. They were dressed in the extreme of the latest fashion, the powder and paint on their faces terribly conspicuous, while in that quiet country church their fantastic array was so remarkable that they looked almost like caricatures of a dressmaker's fashion-plate.

It was painful coming out of church. The Earl paused to speak to his friends; the Tilts, Mr. and Mrs. Harris, and many a humble villager had a warm handshake and the compliments of the season from him, but he stood perfectly immovable as his aunt and cousins passed, coming so near him that the girls' voluminous draperies nearly touched his coat. Mrs. Warren went on with a disdainful sneer, but the elder of her daughters, a red-faced, much-befringed damsel, stopped short, and put out her hand with what was meant to be a most fascinating smile.

"Come cousin, you needn't bear malice at Christmas time; you'd better make friends!"

Lord Danver answered not a word; one would have said he did not hear her. He turned to Belle and said distinctly,—

"I see the Rector has taken my mother to the carriage; we had better join her, Miss Cleaver. The horses don't like standing."

Everyone saw the "cut direct" administered to Miss Warren, and most people thought it justified. The Rector was an exceptionally good easy man; he disliked the family at Dover Cottage as much as he could dislike anyone, but he thought such a public slight was carrying their punishment a little too far, and he said so frankly to his wife.

"I don't blame Geoffrey," replied Mrs. Tilt; "those girls are the most brazen creatures, and he must do something, poor fellow, to stop the rumour Mrs. Warren is spreading broadcast that all family differences are to be adjusted by the Earl's marrying her daughter Kate."

"Which is Kate, the red-haired one?"

"Papa," corrected Mary, "her hair's auburn!"

"Well," said Mr. Tilt, gravely, as he went on carving the turkey—they dined early to-day at the Rectory for the servants' convenience—"I've seen many family quarrels, and heard many family secrets, but I never heard anything so strange as Lady Danver's infatuation for the Warrens. They are not agreeable people, or even amusing. She got on perfectly well for twenty years of her life without them. Why she should cling to them against the wishes of a son she idolizes I can't make out!"

"It is odd they stay," said Martha, "they have not a single friend in the place."

"My dear child, they're as poor as church mice, and depend upon it, in spite of the Earl's prejudices, they get a good many creature comforts from the Court. The best thing that could happen would be for the Earl to marry. At the Dower House, with only her jointure, Lady Danver would not be rich enough for them to prey on."

"I believe if Geoffrey married they would leave Ardley," said Mrs. Tilt, thoughtfully. "The oddest point of the whole affair is that both Lady Danver and Mrs. Warren seem positively to believe Kate will be the next countess, but unless they drag Geoffrey and go through the marriage ceremony while he is under their control, I don't think they will have their way."

Meanwhile the Warrens had returned home in a temper not at all befitting the season of peace and goodwill. Masterful and domineering as the widow might show herself to her sister, Lady Danver, she was a very meek person at home, being kept in very good order by her daughters, Jemima and Kate, or, as they were designated by their familiar acquaintances, Jinks and Kate. Kate, by three years the elder of the two, was a good-looking young woman of twenty-four, who, if she had only been content to leave her face as nature made it, would have been a very attractive girl. Unfortunately, Kate preferred art to nature; her hair was dyed, her face was painted and powdered, her eyebrows darkened with a lavish expenditure of time and material, with the result that Miss Warren looked more than a trifle fast, and was so loud and conspicuous in appearance that every one of gentle birth round Ardley fought shy of her.

The cottage was just the sort of house often found in a country village—too good for a labouring man, yet lacking accommodation for a large family or many servants; it seemed just suited to a lady of limited means, and Mrs. Warren had thought herself in luck's way to get it.

For the widow's income was practically nil. Before the late Earl's death opened to her the Land of Promise (Ardley Court) she had got her living—and a poor one, too—by letting lodgings. She sold off her furniture and the "goodwill" of her lodging-house as soon as she found how easy it was to ingratiate herself with the widowed Countess; she packed off her two girls to school, and devoted herself entirely to her sister with an assiduity that knew no bounds.

She kept Jemima and Kate away from Ardley until her dominion over their aunt was accomplished, then she brought them home with the information Kate was to marry Lord Danver and reign at Ardley Court.

The sisters were very sharp, wide-awake young women; they decided it was a good thing to be related to a Countess. The Court dairy, gardens, poultry yard, and stables were all taxed to supply the cottage with luxuries and comforts; bank-notes were to be had from their aunt almost for the asking, and the girls promptly decided their mother held some mysterious power

over her sister, and earnestly desired to share the secret which gave her so much authority.

Mrs. Warren, however, resolutely refused; in all else she was like wax in her children's hands, but she would not tell them by what spell she extorted so many good things from their aunt. Perhaps she was afraid of their killing the goose which laid her such wonderful golden eggs.

The family at the cottage dined early on Christmas Day; the meal was quite a banquet, but ill-humour reigned. Mrs. Warren had promised the girls they should dine at the Court, and (owing to the Earl's firmness) she had failed; the invitation had duly been extorted from the Countess, but a tear-stained note had followed the widow home begging her not to bring the dear girls on Christmas Day, as Geoffrey had positively refused to receive them.

This note, coupled with the "cut direct" the Earl had himself administered to Kate, had made the girls extremely wrath.

"What is the use of your promising me I shall be a countess?" cried Mrs. Warren's firstborn angrily, as her mother dissected the turkey. "You must see my fine cousin treats me like the dirt beneath his foot."

"The time has not come yet, love," said her mother calmly; "before another Christmas comes round Lord Danver will be on his knees to you."

Kate shook her head.

"You're a clever woman, ma, I'll admit; but you talk bigger than you can perform. All the village knows that Lord Danver hates us and would drive us out of the place if he could."

"He can't!" snapped Mrs. Warren; "you just hide your time, Kate, and you'll be a countess yet."

"Well," said Jinks, sharply, "it's all very well your telling Kate to bide her time; how if, while she is waiting, our noble cousin falls in love with some one else?"

"He wouldn't dare," said Mrs. Warren; "the moment I saw the slightest signs of such a thing I should interfere."

"Well, I really think then, ma, it's time you interfered now; I'm sure the way he looked at that little companion in church this morning was most lover-like. She's a pretty little thing, too; I shouldn't wonder if she became Lady Danver."

"Miss Forest will not remain at the Court," said the widow, drily; "I have taken care of that; in two or three days' time she will be so nervous and fanciful your aunt will only be too thankful to get rid of her."

But Mrs. Warren had reckoned without her host.

At the Court Christmas afternoon passed very quietly. Dinner was at six, and after it was over the family dispensed with more attendance, it being the custom for their retainers to have a grand supper party in the servants' hall. A goodly gathering there was of humble "friends and relations." This party had been one of the things cut off by Lady Danver in her spirit of retrenchment; but the Earl had given directions for it to be held this year on a grander scale even than formerly, and had declared his intention of coming in later to see the guests.

Lady Danver excused herself from accompanying him.

"I can't go, Geoffrey," she said feebly, "and no one will miss me. All the servants bade me and call me a miser. They will be quite satisfied if you go by yourself, or take Miss Cleaver."

"I wish you would come, mother."

But she was obdurate, so Lord Danver and Belle set out together for the servants' hall, where they found supper in full swing, the heavier part of the entertainment being over and nuts and oranges the order of the day.

Everyone rose as the Earl entered, and Hicks, with much gratification, placed two extra chairs for the honoured guests. Geoffrey handed Belle to one, but himself remained standing.

"I've come to wish you all the compliments of the season," he said cheerfully; "it's a good while now since we met together on a Christmas night, but I hope now my step-father's old custom will be kept up every year. I have finished my wanderings and come home for good. I won't make you a speech, my friends, I am not great at that sort of thing, and I'd rather not keep you from the games which I know some of you are looking forward to, but I'll give you one toast and then leave you, fill your glasses and drink with me to the New Year we shall so soon be entering. May it prove a happy one to all of us and bring us peace and goodwill!"

Someone placed a glass of wine before Belle, and the toast was honoured by every one present with great gusto; then, before Lord Danver could move, Hicks was on his feet flushed and triumphant.

"Here's to the Earl, my friends, our master and the best we've ever known; here's long life to him and happiness, and before Christmas comes round again may he have brought home his wife and give us all a lady we can love and honour!"

The toast was honoured with tremendous applause. Lord Danver thanked them heartily, and with Miss Cleaver's hand on his arm walked out of the hall.

"Don't tell my mother," he said gravely, when they were safe in their own quarters again, pausing to speak his warning before they reached the drawing-room; "she would think they meant a reflection on her. Poor mother! yet once, every one at Ardley loved her dearly, though she and I both had to live down a good deal of opposition when first she came here a bride."

"Why?" asked Belle, simply; "were you 'foreigners' I have heard that country people always call strangers from other parts of England so."

"Oh no, I was born within ten miles of the Court and my mother had lived in the neighbourhood for many years, but my stepfather had had one daughter who was the darling of Ardley and all this country side. I can't tell you the particulars, I was only a child at the time; she went on a long foreign tour with her father, and never returned."

Belle started,

"Do you mean she was killed?"

He shook his head.

"I know nothing of her fate. Lord Danver came back alone just two years later with a deep mourning band on his hat, and said his daughter was dead. Where she died, and of what disease he never said; through the peerage we learned later that her death took place in the second year of their absence. No one *knows* anything more, but an impression got abroad that Lady Isobel had lost her heart to a penniless artist and died of grief when her father prevented her marrying him. She was only nineteen, and—my mother says—the loveliest creature the sun ever shone upon. Lord Danver married my mother very soon after, she was very fond of him and he proved a good kind friend to her, but from the day we came here people prophesied evil. The Danver property had never gone out of the direct line before; everyone declared the Earl's harshness to his daughter would be punished by there being no children of his second marriage. Though Lady Isobel had been dead a year before we came, everyone regarded us as her supplinters, and it took us years to live down the popular prejudice."

"But you did at last?"

"Quite, I think. But people are never tired of telling me of the old legend that troubles must come thick and fast when the Court passed out of the direct line. My mother, poor soul, is terribly superstitious, I am not in the least so."

Belle was strangely silent, her fancy had wandered to the story of the beautiful young heiress dying of a broken heart.

"Where was she buried?" she asked suddenly.

"Who? My cousin Isobel? We never knew; her father put up a brass tablet to her memory in Ardley Church, but he never mentioned her name to any living creature. I think, myself, there must be some truth in the story of his being harsh to her, for I know from the time of her death he changed terribly. He used to be the most sociable of men, the life of any company; but after his daughter's death and his own second marriage he almost gave up society. He lived here from year's end to year's end, filling up his life with the duties of his position and winning the love and esteem of all. When I heard of his death I felt I had lost my best friend; Heaven knows I have missed him sorely enough since."

When they entered the drawing-room Belle felt certain she heard the rustle of a woman's dress, but no one was there except Lady Danver reclining on the sofa. She opened her eyes as though she had been sleeping, and said querulously,—

"What ages you have been gone!"

"Only half-an-hour. I wish you had come with us, mother, they would have liked it."

"I think it a great mistake your having this party at all," said Lady Danver, sitting up and looking at Geoffrey reproachfully; "it must cost you at least five pounds."

"Nearer ten, I expect; but, mother, you forget I am a rich man."

"You won't be rich long if you go in for such reckless extravagance. Actually, Hicks distributed twenty tons of coal yesterday."

"By my order, mother. It is bitterly cold, though seasonable weather. I can't have the poor people freezing at Christmas time."

"You'll be a beggar by next Christmas," cried the Countess, breaking into a fit of hysterical sobs. "Oh, Geoffrey, I know you will, do take my advice and marry Kate."

"My dear mother," and he spoke with infinite gentleness, "no chance that I can foresee will rob me of my fortune. If it is any comfort to you to know it, I don't spend half my income. Do give up this morbid craze of yours that we are being ruined. As to matrimony," and he smiled quaintly, "most of my friends tell me it is a very expensive institution. I think they would be amused at your recommending it as a retrenchment."

He passed out of the room as he spoke; Lady Danver wrung her hands.

"He will be utterly ruined," she moaned; "my handsome Geoff who has never known a day's poverty! What will become of him!"

Deeply touched, for Lady Danver evidently believed just what she said, Belle bent over her and tried to soothe her, but it was some time before she could be calmed, and then she readily agreed that she had better go to bed. Mrs. Hicks, faithful to her lady even in the excitement of the Christmas party, met them at the door of the Countess's room.

"I thought you'd be coming up, my lady. Why, you look quite tired out."

It was early yet, not much after ten, and Belle hardly knew whether to retire at once or go back to the drawing-room where she had left a very interesting book. While she hesitated, her candle was extinguished by what seemed a blast of wind. In the darkness that followed she distinctly felt the touch of a hand, a cold, bony hand, it seemed to the girl's heated imagination, while a clear, low-toned voice said in her ear,—

"Leave this house at once or you will regret it to your dying day!"

It was too much for Belle; perhaps all she had gone through in the last two days had weakened her nerves. She gave one piercing shriek, dropped the candle she was carrying, and fell in a forlorn heap on the ground.

The scream had reached two people: Lord Danver, whose study was just below the west gallery, and Mrs. Hicks; the latter, leaving Lady Danver with a hasty excuse, rushed to the scene, but had hardly got to the spot where Miss Cleaver lay when the Earl joined her.

"What does this mean, Hicks?" he said, gravely; "half the house is in darkness. There is not a single light between the grand staircase and here."

Mrs. Hicks spoke in a low tone.

"Every one of those lamps were alight when I came upstairs, my lord; some one must have turned them out. I'll warrant they never went out by themselves."

She had raised Belle now and placed her on a broad settee which stood invitingly in the window. With a little gasping cry the girl opened her eyes.

"You're better now, Miss Cleaver," said the housekeeper, "and I'll make

bold to leave you with the Earl, for her ladyship may be frightened if I stay away longer."

Lord Danver sat down by Belle, troubled at the terror in her beautiful eyes.

"Were you frightened at the dark?" he asked her, gently; "or, did you miss your footing? I have just discovered all the lamps in this part of the house seem to have gone out."

But Belle did not speak, she only sat there trembling as one smitten by a mortal chill.

Lord Danver put one hand on her shoulder and said persuasively,—

"Try and tell me what frightened you."

"You would only laugh at me."

"I never laughed at anyone in my life. You may trust me, indeed you may."

"I had said good-night to Lady Danver," began Belle, timidly, "and I was debating whether I would go straight to bed or fetch my book from downstairs. I was standing just underneath the lamp over there with a candle in my hand."

"And the lamp was out?"

"Oh, yes. Suddenly a gust of wind blew out my candle and left me in total darkness. Lord Danver, I can't prove my words. You may think me mad, but I felt I was not alone. I felt a cold, bony hand touch mine. I heard a voice close to my ear whisper,—'Leave this house at once or you will regret it till your dying day,' and then I remembered nothing more. I cried out and everything seemed turning round and round."

"Look here," said Geoffrey, persuasively, "if you go to bed now you'll be thinking of ghosts all night. Come down to the library, I will fetch you a glass of wine and do my best to explain what frightened you."

"Please don't try and persuade me I fancied it all," she said, eagerly; "you would only make me think I was going mad."

"I won't do that, but I shall not speak another word until you have drunk that glass of wine and grown a little calmer."

He placed her in a huge armchair in the ingle nook, fetched the wine with his own hands, and stood over her while she drank it. Then when he had taken the empty glass and a little colour had crept into her cheeks, he said gravely,—

"It was no supernatural warning you heard to-night, Miss Cleaver, but a fiendish device of my aunt or her daughters—I am not sure which—to so work upon your fears as to induce you to leave Ardley."

"But," Belle was looking at him with piercingly bright eyes, "how could they get in?"

"My poor child," and Geoffrey spoke as simply as though Belle had been eight instead of eighteen, "you don't know how far an unscrupulous woman can go. Mrs. Warren's one aim is to get my mother utterly under her power. It is impossible, try as I will, for me to be always on the watch myself. The doctor recommended young, cheerful society, and I engaged a lady companion. The first was a creature of Mrs. Warren's, the second, poor soul, was too full of her own griefs to think of ours; the last was about the equal in manners of her scullerymaid. I knew that the moment I found anyone likely to be a real friend to my mother and win her confidence Mrs. Warren would do her utmost to scare her from the Court, but I own I did not think she would begin so soon."

"Do you know," Belle spoke almost under her breath, "I fancied there was someone in the drawing-room when we came back from the servants' hall."

"Likely enough; there are a dozen ways of entering this house, and I know the Warrens come far oftener than they wish me to suspect. Oh, Miss Cleaver," and the young man gave a heavy sigh, "those women are the curse of my life."

"Couldn't you go away and take Lady Danver?" suggested Belle; "if Mrs. Warren is so poor, she could not afford to follow you from place to place, and if you travelled for a year you would get rid of her."

"I have thought of that, but my mother positively refuses to leave the Court even for a night, and our doctor's opinion is averse; he says her heart is so weak she could not bear much fatigue."

"Then there is nothing to be done."

"There is this: to discover the full nature of the power Mrs. Warren exercises over my mother. I have pondered over it till I am nearly crazy. Once I even went so far as to wonder if I was a changeling, substituted for the real Geoffrey Danver by some designing woman, and that, Mrs. Warren herself in the secret, was bribed to silence. But"—and he laughed dimly—"common-sense contradicts this view; if I were not her own son, my mother would naturally be the first to wish the fraud exposed. Again, I am so remarkably like the Danvers that I, as the saying goes, carry my descent in my face."

"It seems a mystery."

"The strangest I ever heard of, and one that shadows my whole life. You look very white and tired, Miss Cleaver. I won't keep you up any longer. Remember you have no supernatural foes to fear, and from the Warrens I will protect you with my best strength and will. Good night!"

His hand closed on hers. He lifted the little fingers to his lips as respectfully as though she had been a princess, and that kiss thrilled Belle through and through, and sent her to bed with a strange new happiness dawning in her heart.

To bed, but not to sleep. Try as she would, sleep would not come to Belle's tired eyes; she had so much to think of she lay awake going over and over the strange things that had happened to her in the last few days.

Was it possible that a week ago she had been at St. Alban's, apparently settled as Miss Strong's teacher for years to come, or at any rate until Dick made enough money to come home and marry her. Why, now it seemed ages since she left St. Alban's, and the trials and perplexities of Lord Danver seemed far more interesting to her than her lover's long, carefully-written letters.

Poor little Belle! She had no thought of disloyalty to Dick in her heart, but it was not his face which was passing and repassing before her fancy as she tossed uneasily on her bed. She was thinking of Geoffrey, Lord Danver, and the trouble which darkened his life. Belle would have done a great deal to lighten the young earl's burden.

She quite forgot that she had come to Ardley only because she dreaded the expense she would cause her family by going home. Belle thought she should be quite contented to spend a long while at the Court, and then under a sudden recollection it occurred to her that she must devise some way of writing home, or her father's anxiety would be terrible.

It was probable that a budget of Christmas letters (Dick's among them) had gone to St. Alban's House for her. Miss Strong might or might not send them back to London, but in any case Belle must write home as soon as possible.

Only how was she to manage? Her father would never consent to write to her as "Miss Cleaver," while any letters addressed to the Court to "Miss Forest" would probably be returned to the post-office as sent in mistake. She must devise some plan. Could she write and ask the help of Mrs. Guy Tempest. That seemed the most likely plan, only there was just one little difficulty—she had no idea of the bride's address.

Poor Belle had not half smoothed the tangled skein of her future course, when, in the small hours of the morning, fairly tired out, her wearied eyes at last closed in sleep.

CHAPTER V.

MISS STRONG did not write the account of Belle Forest's misdeeds to Elizabeth-street. Perhaps she had some pity in her heart, and would not add to Mr. Forest's burdens by blame of his eldest child; so she gave up the idea, and considered herself very benevolent.

But something extraordinary happened. On Christmas Day arrived a fat, bulky letter, directed in an unmistakably childish hand to the late pupil-teacher, and the following morning brought another in the writing Miss Strong had learnt to recognise as the artist's.

"I don't like it," she said briskly to her sister; "it looks as though the girl had never gone home at all. Surely, Maria, she can't have been so misguided as to be afraid to face her parents?"

"Belle Forest was afraid of nothing," returned Miss Maria; "she would not get home till late on Christmas-eve, and most likely these letters were posted before she reached Elizabeth-street."

Miss Strong tried to feel it was all right, but in three more days another letter came, addressed this time to herself. In it Mr. Forest asked if his daughter were ill or in any trouble; not only had she let Christmas pass without writing home, but a letter from himself, urgently needing an answer, had received none.

The schoolmistress wrote back promptly. She had dismissed Belle for levity of conduct on Christmas-eve. She saw her safely into the London train, and knew nothing more. Mr. Forest showed the letter to his wife; it was not a very wise proceeding, seeing she was always prone to think the worst of Belle, but he was one of those dreamy, unpractical men who can never think or act alone.

"Well," and his better half tossed her head indignantly, "I always did say you spoil Belle; her manners were most objectionable. Dismissed for levity of conduct, indeed! Just what I expected!"

But she had gone too far. The meek-spirited father flamed up at this. "She is one of the sweetest, truest girls Heaven ever made, and I'll not believe a word against her."

"Well, Miss Strong dismissed her a week ago. I suppose you believe that?"

"More shame for her," breathed the artist.

"And we have seen and heard nothing of her. It looks very much as if she had been false to young Fraser, and taken up with someone else."

"Betsy, I won't have you say such things. Remember, please, that Isobel is my child!"

"Ay, and your favourite child, too. I've worked for you and slaved for you these seventeen years, but my boys and girls are nothing to you compared to your first wife's daughter!"

"Peace," said the artist, slowly; "we are poor enough, Betsy, but we can at least have that."

"And do you mean to sit here with folded hands and do nothing?" cried his energetic partner; "why, even I, who you say have no feeling for the girl, would never rest until I had found out the truth."

"I can trust Belle," the father replied; "she will write soon, and I am quite sure her letter will explain everything."

And it did. In a few days there came a long letter from Belle to her step-mother—perhaps the girl felt Mrs. Forest would appreciate her motives better than her unworlly father. She wrote that, having unfortunately vexed Miss Strong, she had been dismissed in disgrace; that on the way home she had met a young lady whose home was in Bournhill, and whom she knew from her sisters being Miss Strong's pupils. Miss Cleaver, went on Belle, had found her a temporary situation (one she had accepted for herself, and been unable to undertake), it was that of companion to a lady. She was to be a month on trial, and then, if satisfactory, be engaged at a hundred a year. Even at the worst, she would be well paid for the month, and that would bring it to a time when situations were more easily got than at Christmas.

"Well," said Mrs. Forest, as she laid down the letter, "after all the child is not much to blame. I shall write and tell her so."

"What is the address?"

"c/o Mrs. Guy Tempest, Holly Terrace, Thornton Heath."

Belle had been desperately anxious to write home, but she dared not give

the address of Ardley Court, as the "Miss Forest" on the letters she might receive from home would have betrayed her at once. But when Nancy Tempest wrote to tell her Guy entered on his new employment in a London branch bank on the first of January, and they had secured dear little lodgings at Thornton Heath, a plan of communicating with home struck her. She sent her letter to Nancy to post, begging her to receive and forward any that might come in reply.

It was a weight off her mind when she had done this, though she was little prepared for the news that awaited her. A letter from Africa, which had travelled to St. Alban's House and back, told her of Dick's prodigious success on the diamond fields. If his good fortune continued, in another year he could come home with enough to make them independent for the rest of their lives.

Belle put the letter in her pocket with a sigh. She did not feel in the least elated. Dick was a good, true fellow, but he did not fill her heart. She was in no hurry to be married. Life in a pretty suburban house with Dick did not seem attractive.

Time had gone on by this time and Belle felt quite at home at the Court. At the ball on New Year's Eve she had been received by all the guests as an equal; she had danced as much as anyone, and Lady Danver had introduced her to all her guests as "my young friend, Miss Cleaver." The ball had been a brilliant success, and more than one person had expressed the hope that it was but the beginning of a return of the old days when the Danvers had been celebrated for their hospitality.

So Christmastide passed on; there were two or three formal dinner parties; there was a tenants' ball, besides school treats and parish concerts. Taken altogether, Ardley had a very gay time of it, but the cloud on Lord Danver's face was not dispersed, and the Warrens kept their extraordinary influence over his mother.

Belle received no more ghostly warnings, but she continually found anonymous notes on her dressing table. Sometimes they were worded in friendly guise, sometimes they threatened her with condign punishment for her misdeeds, but their tenor was always the same—she must leave the Court at once, her presence there would bring her only misery. Once, sorely against her will, she had a *tête-à-tête* with Mrs. Warren. Belle was reading to Lady Danver when the widow came in with her soft, cat-like tread, and after a glance between the sisters, the Countess left the room, bidding Miss Cleaver wait till she came back.

Belle looked eagerly at the door, but Mrs. Warren had placed herself so as to cut off the girl's retreat, she began at once,—

"It is always unpleasant to sow dissension in a family, Miss Cleaver, and I regret that so young a person as yourself should be guilty of it. Lady Danver has not the least need for a companion; my dear girls can do all their aunt requires. My sister's heart is so kind she does not like the task of dismissing you, and she has asked me to undertake it for her. I will give you a cheque for ten pounds if you will leave the Court this afternoon and return home."

Did she count on Lord Danver's absence? He had gone to London by the morning train, and was not expected to return till the morrow; it looked like it.

Belle waited a moment; she had been engaged as Lady Danver's companion, not her son's, and if the Countess wished to get rid of her she had every right to do so. But did she wish it? Belle thought not. Only that morning Lady Danver had been speaking of the pleasant walks they would have together when the spring came. This hardly agreed with the immediate dismissal, so Belle took courage.

"I was engaged by Lady Danver, and I shall only take my dismissal from herself," said the girl calmly. "I deny your right to interfere in the matter. You have not one iota of authority here!"

"That's all you know about it!" was the sharp retort. "I could turn the whole pack of you out to-morrow, and I shall, too, if I am driven to extremities."

Belle kept perfectly silent, she thought this would make Mrs. Warren reveal more, but the widow only grew furious at the girl's calm.

"I suppose you think it an honourable thing to come here and try to steal my daughter's lover. Oh, yes, I've heard of your goings on with my nephew, Lord Danver—fainting in his arms, and so on. But mark my words! you'll gain nothing by it. There's only one woman in the world Lord Danver can marry—my daughter Kate."

Then Belle's indignation burst all bounds. She went to the bell and rang it, such a peal as Mrs. Hicks had not heard from her lady's boudoir for many a day. When the housekeeper appeared in alarmed haste, Miss Cleaver turned to her.

"Will you kindly help me to leave the room?" she asked. "Mrs. Warren refuses to move from between me and the door, and I am anxious to get away."

The housekeeper glanced from one to the other. Mrs. Warren clung doggedly to her chair, which was planted exactly in the open doorway. Mrs. Hicks measured the space with her eye.

"I think you could squeeze through, Miss Cleaver, if I stand here and help you."

And taking Belle's trembling hand she managed to draw her safely outside the door, leaving Mrs. Warren in possession of the field.

"I thought she'd be up to some mischief," said the housekeeper, when they were safe in Belle's room, and the girl sank panting on the sofa. "She knew the master would not be home till to-morrow, and just came up to ride rough shod over us all."

"She wanted me to go away this afternoon. She said Lady Danver had asked her to dismiss me."

"May Heaven forgive her; but it's a falsehood," said the old servant. "It's only this very day as I was dressing her my lady told me she felt much

better since you came, and she really did think after all her failures she was suited with a companion at last, while Dr. Jeremy can't say enough about the good you've done her. He says she's looked ten years younger since you came."

"Then, why do they hate me?"

"Ask me something easier, Miss Cleaver. I should say they find it more difficult to get at my lady now you're so much with her; but of course I can't tell."

When Belle joined Lady Danver just before dinner, the Countess looked very white and tired; it was as though she had gone through some heavy conflict since they parted, but her manner to her companion was quite as usual, gentle, and almost caressing. There was nothing stern or haughty about the Countess. Long after Belle learned that she had been a penniless "daughter of the people." Her beauty attracted Captain Danver, who married her and sent her to school for two years before he presented her to the world as his wife. Later on that same beauty made her a countess. She was a gentle, kind-hearted woman, living entirely in her affections, but her character had no backbone. She had not her son's strict sense of honour, and she would not have hesitated to deceive him or anyone else had she thought it for their own good.

Society had received her very kindly as Mrs. Danver, and as her temper was unusually sweet, and she possessed a great knack of pleasing people, no one resented her advancement on her second marriage. But the old county families whispered among themselves how the strange state of affairs which sprang up at the Court during the young Earl's absence could never have been if his mother had been born in the purple, while the presence of Mrs. Warren and her daughters at Ardley was considered a striking example of the evils resulting from a *mésalliance*.

Lady Danver said nothing to Belle of her sister and the latter's interview with her. She talked chiefly of her son and his stepfather's pride in him. The Earl, she declared, had loved Geoffrey as a child of his own, and had planned over and over again what he was to do when he came into the property.

"What a man has talked of and worked for for years must be more his real wish than a few words spoken on his deathbed; don't you think so, Miss Cleaver?"

Belle agreed, and then a wild inspiration seized her. Could her namesake, the Lady Isobel, whose strange history she had heard, be still alive. As far as she could recollect, no mention had been made of the cause or place of her death; but then she remembered the tablet in the church to her memory, and the record of her death in the peerage. No; it could not be that his cousin lived, and Lord Danver had no right to Ardley Court.

"This is a beautiful place," said the Countess, who was unusually talkative. "I remember when Geoffrey was born, and I thought of the difference between his prospects and those of my cousin's little girl. It seemed hard to me. I did not grudge Isobel her fortune, but I'm afraid I did grudge her the Court. I loved the girl dearly, but when she died, though I shed sincere tears for her, I couldn't forget her death made my boy the heir. All the years after our marriage Lord Danver was passionately anxious for a son, but I think I should almost have hated any son or daughter, because they must have stood in my boy's light. You can't understand how I cling to Geoffrey, Miss Cleaver. I would give my life for him any day."

And yet she would not give up the intimacy which pained and grieved him so terribly. It was a strange case.

"Don't you think," asked Belle, gently, "there is one thing you might do to make your son happy. He is very anxious about your health. He would be so pleased if you would go abroad with him. He thinks a year of change and pleasant travel would do you so much good."

Lady Danver shook her head.

"I am too old to travel, my dear, and I have a reason for wishing not to leave the Court unless Geoffrey marries, and I retire to the Dower House. I shall never sleep away from the Court until I die."

Belle started.

"But you are not old!" she persisted. "You can't be fifty, and many women of that age call themselves quite young."

"I am forty-seven," was Lady Danver's reply, "and I think sometimes, Miss Cleaver, I have lived those seven last years too long. I have gone through more in them than tongue can tell, and all in vain. I have saved and pinched to put by something for my son, but Geoffrey is recklessly extravagant, and I know there will be nothing to fall back on when the crash comes."

She spoke quite calmly. Her tone was infinitely sad, but there was not a trace of excitement in her manner. It was evident she meant just what she said, and Belle, who really loved the gentle, nervous woman, felt intensely sorry for her.

"Don't you think," she ventured, "it would be better if you told Lord Danver exactly what you fear? I have always heard men understand business better than we women do, and he might be able to avert the danger."

Lady Danver shook her head.

"He would be more likely to bring it down upon us. Geoffrey is terribly rash, he is just like his father's family."

"I suppose the late Lord Danver was very fond of him," said Belle, feeling it was a pleasure to the countess to talk of bygone days.

"Very; but through all his love for him there was a shade of jealousy that any one but a child of his own should succeed him. My husband was a good man, Miss Cleaver, but a hard one. He took up strange prejudices. He conceived one against my sister though he had never seen her."

From Belle's own experience of Miss Warren she could quite sympathise with the dead nobleman. Lady Danver went on,—

"You see Jane married badly. Her husband was a scamp. He left her utterly unprovided for, and she has had a hard battle to bring up her girls. There were only us two sisters, I was pretty, or people said so, and Jane was plain. My life has been different to hers, just because of that, not because I was a better woman. You are young yet, my dear, and have your life before you. When you marry I hope it will be a man who loves you for yourself, not just because you are beautiful."

Isobel blushed crimson as she remembered Dick Fraser and how little she had thought of him since coming to Ardley.

CHAPTER VI.

LORD DANVER had gone up to town to see his lawyers, an old-established firm who had managed his step-father's affairs for thirty years. Mr. Harcourt, the senior partner, received the young Earl, and marvelled at his troubled, careworn expression.

"I have not come on ordinary business," said Geoffrey, "but on a matter which is to me of vital consequence. Mr. Harcourt, I am almost driven frantic by morbid fancies. Will you listen to me, and instead of laughing at me for a madman, do your best to advise me?"

"I will," said the old man, gravely. "I was your own father's intimate friend, I was your step-father's trusted adviser, and I don't believe any one in the world can have your interests more at heart. Now, my lord, what is it? I can't expel the Warrens for you, since the lease of the cottage has been granted them, but if you've made up your mind to take my advice, and 'buy' your aunt out, I'll go down to Ardley and try to arrange the business for you myself."

"I will accept your offer gladly, but that's not the first question. Mr. Harcourt, I am convinced Mrs. Warren holds some power over my unfortunate mother which makes the latter like wax in her hands. I must solve the problem of what it is, or I believe I shall go mad."

"I think you are wrong," said the lawyer, gravely. "I believe it is the mere influence of a strong mind over a weak one. I have known Lady Danver for thirty years, and much as I esteem her I should call her decidedly a weak character. Women of her type are always governed by some one. In your father's lifetime she had no will apart from his. You yourself can surely remember that she yielded in all things to her second husband. At his death, when she was in a low prostrate state, this Mrs. Warren unluckily got an influence over her. That, to my mind, explains all."

"Much, but not all," corrected Lord Danver. "It does not explain my mother's morbid economy; her sincere conviction that ruin stares us in the face. I am positive she honestly believes if she offends her sister I may have to give up Ardley Court."

"Then she is suffering from a nervous delusion, bordering on mania."

"One moment. You say you have known my mother thirty years. Was there—I mean could there—have been a flaw in her first marriage? Oh, don't look at me like that. I know my father was the soul of honour, and he almost worshipped her, but he was a very young man, and the marriage was in Scotland. Could there have been anything irregular about it which makes me not lawfully the Earl of Danver?"

Mr. Harcourt put out his hand, and grasped the other's firmly.

"Have you been brooding over this? What a pity you did not come to me sooner. Your father and mother were married in St. Mary's Church, Edinburgh, and I was one of the witnesses. If ever I saw a legal ceremony that marriage was one."

Geoffrey heaved a sigh of relief.

"Take my word for it," went on the lawyer, "you are Earl Danver, and the last of a grand old family. If you'll excuse a plain man's plain advice find yourself a wife. The Countess will then retire to the Dower House, and as it is twenty miles from Ardley Court, even if her relations chose to reside near her they couldn't interfere with you. You are beginning to look old and troubled before your time. Try and grow young again."

But when Geoffrey had left the office, Mr. Harcourt stood meditating in front of the fire for a few minutes.

"I was right enough in what I told him. Come what may, he's Earl Danver, but I couldn't have spoken so positively to his being Master of the Court. Lady Isobel Danver left her father a full year before he announced her death to his family and the world. There's nothing to prove she didn't marry and leave a child; if so that child, whether boy or girl, would cut out the young Earl from the property. Well, it's no use putting fresh troubles into his head. I'm sure he seems to have enough already. I advised him to marry, and it's the best thing he can do. If he marries for love the five hundred a year he inherited from his own father will keep them in bread and cheese. If his bride has fortune and influence, why, so much the better."

Not even the mother who bore him, or the old lawyer who had known him from infancy, understood Geoffrey's character sufficiently to guess that to him honour stood before all else, and had Mr. Harcourt only mentioned his own feeling respecting the Lady Isobel's possible marriage the young Earl would never have rested until he had raised the veil of mystery which hung over her fate.

Geoffrey reached the Court quite late in the evening. Dinner was over and the ladies had retired to the drawing-room after a hurried meal. Lord Danver joined them there; his mother looked pale and ill; he was not surprised that in a few minutes she pleaded fatigue and went to her own room. Her son stood by the fire gazing rather absently into the flames and yet not missing a single movement of the pretty girlish figure in the high-backed *prie-dieu* sort of chair. At last Belle found the silence embarrassing; looking up from her embroidery, she said, gently,—

"I think your mother seems very poorly to-night."

"Yes, and I expect from the old cause. I seem to know by instinct that Mrs. Warren was here yesterday."

"Yes, she was here for hours; she honoured me with a long *tête-à-tête*."

Lord Danver looked up quickly.

"Was she rude to you?—but I am sure she would be; tell me all about it."

"The all was not much; she said that your mother did not need a companion, but being very kindhearted she did not like to hurt my feelings herself, and so had asked, as a favour, that her sister would pay and dismiss me. Only fancy, she had brought a cheque with her to bribe me to leave by the afternoon train!"

Lord Danver caught the girl's slim hand in his.

"Why was I not here to spare you such an insult?" he cried bitterly.

"Miss Cleaver, I feel ashamed that such a thing should have happened."

"It did not matter."

She was blushing crimson.

"I mean—I knew her charges were false."

"What charges?"

But Belle had no mind to tell him; it is not particularly easy for a young woman to confess to a young man that she has been accused of trying to win his love.

Lord Danver did not wait for her answer.

"You won't tell me?—Well, shall I tell you why I went to London?"

"If you like."

"I went to take the opinion of my lawyer (a sharp clever man of business and honest as the day), whether there could be any foundation for my poor mother's strange fancy that we were all on the high road to ruin."

"And what did he say?"

"That he would stake his professional reputation that I was the lawful Earl of Danver. Can you guess what it means to me?"

"In part I can. You are so proud, it would be terrible for you to feel there might be a shadow on your name."

"Ah, but more than that. I wanted to feel I had an unsullied name to offer to my wife. Belle, will you be that wife? My love, my darling. You came to me in the December darkness. Will you bring home to my soul the joys of Christmas morn?"

And she?

Every word he spoke thrilled her through and through. She knew the truth now. Love had not passed her by, for she loved Geoffrey Danver with every fibre of her heart. It was not his wealth, not the rank his wife would share, but the man himself. Belle yearned to be with him always, to comfort his griefs, to bear the half of all his burdens.

And between them rose up the memory of a promise given two years ago, before she was seventeen, to Dick Fraser; they had been boy and girl together. She knew she did not love him, but he had pleaded so hard for her promise. It was the day before he sailed for Africa, and with the parting so near the girl could not bear to grieve him.

She knew her mistake now. Love was at her heart, love such as she had never dreamed of, and the man who had inspired it stood opposite her, looking down on her with a world of passion in his blue eyes and begging her to crown his life.

It was an awful struggle. She thought of Dick—Dick, who in a year's time was coming home to marry her. But then she had only friendship to give him. Surely it would be kinder to Dick to tell him the truth now than to let him marry a wife whose whole heart was another man's.

She yielded; it was a terrible temptation, and Belle was not a saint or a martyr, only just a woman with a woman's yearning for love.

"Come," said Danver, gently, "I am waiting for my answer."

He opened his arms and gathered her to his heart. She spoke no word but she knew quite well that in that close embrace she gave herself away.

"Mine always," said Geoffrey, proudly. "Shall I write to your father, Belle, or do you think I had better go North and ask him for his daughter?"

Belle started, she had been so full of Dick's claim on her and the difficulty it presented that she had quite forgotten the other obstacles. Of course, Lord Danver thought of her as Nancy Cleaver, eldest child of the North country lawyer. What was she to do? How could she confess she had deceived him from the very first.

"Please don't write to father," she said, eagerly, her one object, poor child, to gain time. "I would rather tell him first myself. The month's trial I came for is up next Monday. Let me go home then and tell them myself."

Lord Danver did not like the idea and said so.

"Don't you know, Belle, that if people are not very prosperous it's only a reason for showing them more respect. From things you've dropped, little girl, I fancy Mr. Cleaver is a poor man, and that is why I want to fail in no courtesy to him."

"How like you!" she answered, "and please, do tell me, how did you guess my name?"

"I saw 'Belle' in your Prayer-book. Of course your two notes to my mother were signed A. Cleaver. I suppose you are Annabel or Arabella; which is it, dear?"

"Belle," she answered. "I have never been called anything else in my life. I couldn't think of myself by any other name."

"And it just suits you," said Geoffrey, fondly. "Oh, my darling, you must not stay away from me long. I want you to come to me soon, Belle, I am so lonely."

When they parted the man sat up far into the night dreaming of the happiness to come; the girl sat up, too, but her dreams were not of the glad future, but of the confession to be made before she could feel her happiness secure.

She must write to Dick and implore him to set her free. That was easy

compared to telling Geoffrey she had come to the Court under a false name. Dick had always given way to her in all things; she could rely on his silence and forgiveness, but with Geoffrey it was different. She loved him so she could not bear to think he might be disappointed in her, and this was the fear at her heart.—Geoffrey was rich and great. What if, when he learned the truth about Dick—he would be certain to learn it some day from her family—he fancied it was his worldly position that had turned the scale in his favour?

CHAPTER VII.

POOR BELLE!

She woke the next morning with the strange, confused idea of something having happened which often follows on a great excitement. She put her hand to her head, and bit by bit it all came back to her. Lord Danver loved her, she had promised to be his wife. But first two terrible difficulties must be removed from her path. She had to write to South Africa breaking off her engagement with Dick Fraser, and she must confess to Geoffrey that she was not Lawyer Cleaver's daughter but Belle Forest, the eldest child of an impecunious artist.

The last task troubled her most. Africa was so far off, and she had such perfect confidence in Dick—a selfish confidence, perhaps, but yet one which made her certain he would never betray her secret. No, she would write to Dick by the mail which went to-morrow, but she ought not to delay a day in speaking to Geoffrey. This was Thursday, and she was going home on Monday, so she had no time to lose.

Belle dressed herself mechanically and went downstairs, to find that the Countess had a headache and was not up, so she and the Earl must breakfast *tête-à-tête*.

There was nothing remarkable in that; it had happened several times before, but on this particular morning Belle would have preferred Lady Danver's presence, particularly when Geoffrey, unlocking the postbag, handed her such a fat package she felt certain young Mrs. Tempest must have had several letters to forward her.

"Why don't you open your letter?" asked the Earl, seeing she let it remain unnoticed beside her plate. "It looks as though someone had sent you a good long epistle."

"It will keep," said Belle, slowly.

He looked at her in rather a puzzled way.

"I thought you were so fond of your home?"

"So I am. There's no one in the world so good as father and the children are, dear little things! but—I don't think I care for letters."

"I shall take care not to waste many of mine on you," he returned, laughing. "Belle, you will let me speak to my mother to-day, and let her know that when you leave us on Monday it will be to return soon as her daughter."

But Belle refused.

"Please don't," she said, coaxingly. "You see if Lady Danver is angry it would make things so very painful for me."

"Why should she be angry? She is very fond of you."

"But," here Belle's cheeks got very red, "she has set her heart on your marrying Miss Warren."

They were interrupted. Hicks came in to say Mr. Harris was asking to see the Earl on important business. Breakfast was virtually finished, so Geoffrey went off, and Belle turned to the fire and sat down on a low chair to read her letters.

The first was from Mrs. Guy Tempest—late Miss Cleaver—and contained wonderful news. Gay had come into a legacy, her parents had been told of the marriage and were quite reconciled, so the sooner Belle enlightened Lady Danver as to her identity the better.

Well, after all, that did not matter much. In any case Belle must have told of her deception soon, and she turned to the enclosures with anxious eyes.

One she saw at a glance was from Dick, and she opened it with trembling fingers. Yes, the stroke of luck had come. His deposit in the bank now reached ten thousand pounds, quite enough to keep him and his little girl in quiet comfort in England. He should sail very soon, and be with her a short time after his letter. Why should they not be married at Easter?

This was dreadful. Every drop of blood seemed to leave Belle's face; she sat there looking more like a statue than a living woman; she could not think; her trembling fingers crushed the letters in a heap and pushed them into her pocket; thought was madness. Only two things seemed to penetrate her brain—Dick was coming home to marry her, and she loved Geoffrey Danver.

"Belle."

It was the Earl's voice. He bent over her, awestruck by the change in her and fearful that she was ill, as he called on her by every tender name to speak to him.

"You have had bad news," he said, gently. "Won't you tell me what is troubling you? Little girl, let me share your grief."

But Belle declared there was nothing the matter only her head ached ever so badly, and Geoffrey, who knew very little of illness, began to think she was right, and the white face and heavy eyes might come from physical causes, so he rang for Mrs. Hicks and gave his darling into her care, sitting down by the chair Belle had just vacated, and wondering dreamily how his mother would take the news of his engagement.

A little dog, a great favourite of the Earl's, was playing about, and as he came up to Geoffrey with a bark of welcome he dropped a folded paper which, puppy-like, he had been worrying.

Geoff stooped to caress the little creature, and almost unconsciously picked

up the paper Fido had dropped. It was evidently a letter, and the Earl smoothed out the creases wondering how the puppy had been possessed of it. As he did so the words "My darling Belle" caught his eye, and it flashed upon him suddenly that this was the cause of his sweetheart's sudden illness.

"Poor child!" he thought, pitifully. "She always implies that her father is very badly off. I suppose Mr. Cleaver is in some fresh trouble, and has written to tell his daughter. She might have trusted me. I would have helped him readily. I had better read it. If it is as I think I might send a bank note or two anonymously. I wonder why he writes on foreign paper. Fido has eaten one or two corners, but I daresay I can make out enough to tell me if I am right."

No thought of doubting Belle came into his mind. He felt certain from her strange reticence about her home affairs, her reluctance for him to see or write to her father, there must be something strangely wrong about her relations. If he could find out the truth from Mr. Cleaver's letter, why it would save his darling a painful task.

Alas! the letter was not from Belle's father, but the one in which Dick Fraser announced his good fortune, his speedy return to England, and his hope that Belle would allow their long engagement to end by a wedding in April.

Lord Danver sat like a man suddenly turned to stone. He had trusted this girl as his own soul; his whole heart had gone out to her on that Christmas-eve when she came to bring sunshine into his home. How much brighter and happier that home had been with her sweet presence, and all the while she had been deceiving him. The girl who but yesterday had rested in his arms and received his caresses was another man's plighted wife.

"It must have been the money tempted her," he thought at last when he grew calm and the first agony of his passionate indignation had spent itself; "that was it, of course, the cursed money! From the very first she seemed to think poverty the worst of troubles, and I suppose this poor fellow couldn't have been well off or he would never have gone out to Africa. She has wronged him most; he has believed in and trusted her for years, he has spent his best energies in working to make a home for her, and I—well, a month ago I had never seen her face, and yet it seems to me I am so hardly hit I shall carry the memory of that face in my heart to my last day."

Things seemed all at sixes and sevens that day at the Court, good Mrs. Hicks thought. First his lord went for a long drive, and was not home till lunch; then Miss Cleaver's head was so bad that she could not accompany Lady Danver to tea at the Rectory; and, finally, when the Earl came in about four o'clock, he gave orders for a portmanteau to be packed at once—he was going back to London by the next train.

"Could you come down and speak to the Earl, Miss Cleaver?" asked the good woman, putting her head into the pretty bedroom where Belle lay with closed eyes resting on the sofa. "He's going off to London to-night, and he wants to leave a message with you for his mother."

Just as she was, in her pretty red dress, Belle went down to the library. One glance at Lord Danver's face, and she knew something had happened. But what—which of her secrets had he discovered? He soon told her.

"I sent for you to tell you that I know everything, Miss Cleaver," he said gravely. "I found Fido in the act of devouring a letter. I smoothed it out, intending to restore it to its owner, when my eyes fell on your name, and I read it—I had no thought of dishonour." He went on still in the same impassive tone: "I had seen how terribly upset you were, and, in spite of your denial, I believed you had had bad news from home. I fancied Mr. Cleaver was in some pecuniary trouble, and that perhaps I could help him, unknown to you. You know what I read when I tell you the letter was signed Dick Fraser."

Belle found her voice at last.

"Please listen to me. Let me explain."

He shook his head.

"There is no need—I understand the case perfectly. Mr. Fraser went out to Africa to earn enough money to make a home for you. Had I not crossed your path, you might have been faithful to him."

"I never loved Dick," came from the girl, passionately. "We were boy and girl together, and when he was going away he asked me to be engaged to him, and I consented because he seemed so sorry."

"You are not a child," cried Danvers indignantly. "Even two years ago you must have been old enough to know a woman does not accept a man because he seems 'so sorry' at her refusal. I suppose it was on the same grounds you did me the honour of listening to me yesterday?"

"You are cruel. I loved you—I love you now! I meant to write to Dick and explain. He is so fond of me, poor fellow. He would have liked me to be happy."

"And you could have been happier as Countess of Danver, with an income of ten thousand a year, than as plain Mrs. Fraser, with three or four hundred. Oh, yes—I perfectly understand."

She looked at him reproachfully.

"You can't think that it was money made me change. You can't believe your being richer than Dick made me accept you?"

"I am not vain enough to come to any other conclusion. But, Miss Cleaver, you have mistaken your man. I loved you—nay, Heaven help me! I love you now, as truly as man can love woman; but I would not marry you now to save my own life. There would be between us the memory of a broken trust."

"I—I don't understand."

"Then I will put it more plainly: you are ready to give up Mr. Fraser in my favour because I happen to be richer than he is; but, Miss Cleaver, there are other men in England as much my superior in fortune as I am poor Fraser's. Do you think I could ever have any peace or security, any trust or confidence in you again? I should always feel my turn to be betrayed would come in time."

"Then you can't love me," she said.

"It's not a question of love—I shall probably love you till my dying day, but all my trust in you is gone. If I married you to-morrow I should feel my gold had bought you; that your caresses and endearments were purchased at a price. I am of an intensely jealous nature, don't you see; our life together would be one long pain."

"And so we must part?"

"It is best for both of us. Mr. Fraser need never know of this little episode in your career. I will promise to be silent, and no one else has been taken into our confidence."

"And do you suppose I shouldn't tell him?" asked the girl, indignantly. "I am not so utterly false as you imagine. I may have broken my faith to him through love of you, but I could no more marry him without confessing my falseness than I could kill him."

Geoffrey bowed, as though the matter was one of perfect indifference to him.

"I saw my mother last night, and explained to her you wished to go home on Monday to see your relations. You will only need to tell her you do not intend to return. That being the end of the month of trial, there will be no need of any explanations. I am going up to London to-night; I shall not return to the Court till you have left it."

She put out her hand—such a little snowflake of a hand. She looked at him entreatingly.

"Won't you please forgive me, and say good-bye?"

"No; I won't forgive you—I never shall—and I don't wish you well. I think you ought to be punished for your heartless treachery."

She raised her beautiful eyes to his face.

"Lord Danver," she said, with a gentle dignity quite new to her, "we shall probably never meet again in this world. With what may be the last words I ever speak to you, I assure you it was love for you, not your rank and money that tempted me."

"I don't believe it; nothing you can say will convince me! If I had lost my fortune, if I was poor and obscure and you came back to me, then I might believe you, but never else; and that"—with a bitter smile—"is an impossible chance. Poverty is never likely to touch me; and you will be the dutiful wife of Mr. Richard Fraser in less than three months' time."

"Good-bye," she said, gently; "I have told you the truth, and some day you will believe me."

Those words haunted Lord Danver strangely in the dark after-time which was so surely coming; but when Belle spoke them he put no more faith in them than in the rest of her story. So the two who loved each other better, perhaps, than aught on earth parted. The acquaintance begun on Christmas-eve, and which had ripened so speedily into love, was ended for ever before the first month of the year was over. Four weeks did not sound so very long, but in them Belle knew full well had been compressed all the romance of her life. Her future seemed to her strangely desolate, since for all time she must be a stranger to Geoffrey's love.

CHAPTER VIII.

YOUNG Mrs. Tempest was much surprised when she received a short note from Miss Forest saying she was leaving Ardley Court at the end of her month of trial, and as she should most likely never meet any member of the Danver family again, she saw no need to reveal the fact she had been known by them under a false name.

She said very little of her stay at Ardley, but Nancy was quick enough to read between the lines, and felt pretty certain something unpleasant had happened. Guy, when consulted, agreed with her.

"There's no need for you to refuse the poor girl's wish, Nancy. I seem to think I've heard from someone the Danvers are a very queer family. I fancy the Countess has a screw loose; if we hold our tongues little Miss Forest need never mention her month's experience at the Court. If she refers future employers to her old schoolmistress at Bournhill there will be no harm done."

Lady Danver parted from Belle with many regrets, but they were mingled—the girl felt—with a certain relief that the companion Mrs. Warren so strongly objected to would no longer annoy her. Belle thought she should never understand the mystery of Mrs. Warren's influence over the Countess now. She wondered whether a fourth companion would be engaged, or if the Earl would give up the contest and leave his mother free to be as intimate with the Warrens as she pleased.

Lady Danver gave Belle two crisp banknotes and a nice little pile of silver. Then from her jewel box she took a beautiful locket of rich dead gold, with the monogram I. D. in small pearls.

"It belonged to my step-daughter, Lady Isobel. I think, Miss Cleaver, you are rather like her, and so I will give it you for a keepsake."

They had been duly warned of Belle's return this time at Elizabeth-street, and Mr. Forest was standing on the platform at King's Cross when the train came in. To his daughter's anxious eyes he looked thinner and more careworn than ever; and surely his threadbare greatcoat could not be much protection from the bitter January wind.

But Belle only felt a great relief. She was with her father again—the one creature in England who believed in her entirely. She loved him all the more because he had failed so terribly in life's battle, and she clung to his arm as they passed out of the terminus together—leaving her box to follow by parcels delivery—as though she had found her best prop and support.

"Dad," said the girl gently, "I want to talk to you. Do you think we might go and have a cup of tea somewhere before we walk home?"

He nodded.

"I told your mother I should go to the Stores for some drawing paper. I need not tell her I got it before I met you."

They went into a large confectioner's shop, well furnished with little round tables for customers to eat what they purchased in comfort. The pair selected one in the remotest, darkest part of the shop.

Mr. Forest ordered tea and then looked at his firstborn.

"Wasn't Mrs. Tempest good to you, dear?"

"She was as good as possible, but she is not the lady to whom I went as companion. I want to tell you everything, dad, only I would rather mother should not know quite all."

"She thinks you were very wise to take the situation, though it only lasted a month. Miss Cleaver found it for you, didn't she?"

"Yes. And in taking it I had to take her name. Don't you see, father, they had engaged Miss Cleaver as companion, and they thought Miss Cleaver came to them, but she had married Mr. Guy Tempest and I was filling her place."

"It wasn't right, Belle."

"I know—but, father, I couldn't bear to come home on Christmas-eve and be just another burden to you."

He stroked her hand caressingly.

"You've something more to tell me, dear."

"Yes, it was Ardley Court where I have been staying. I was companion to Lady Danver."

"Good Heavens!"

"Why! Do you know her, dad?"

"I never thought to tell you, child, but you are growing a woman now, and you have a right to know the truth. I married your mother against her father's wishes. He placed her in a French convent to part her from me. She managed to run away, and we were married as soon as we reached England."

"And my mother knew the Danvers?"

"She was Lord Danver's only child—the Lady Isobel. If she had not displeased him, she would have been a great heiress."

Belle put down her cup and locked her hands together. The mystery at Ardley Court was plain to her at last. She knew perfectly well now why Mrs. Warren had such a fatal power over her sister, and why Lady Danver always prophesied ruin for her son. Ardley Court and its revenues could descend—the Countess herself had said so—in the female line. On his deathbed the late Earl had desired to do justice to his grandchild—had confided to his wife her existence and her father's name—perhaps, too, the proofs of her parents' marriage.

Lady Danver in her jealous grief at her own son being cut out had held her tongue and hidden the proofs, leaving the world to believe Lady Isobel had died childless. That was it, and Mrs. Warren had either instigated the fraud or discovered it, and so possessed a terrible power over her sister.

Only one thing puzzled Belle: Her father, unpractical though he was, must surely know his first-born child was Lord Danver's heiress.

But when she asked him gravely if he had told the Earl of her mother's death, his answer revealed the enigma.

"Yes, he came to the funeral, and he told me he intended to marry again, and that even if he had no children by his second wife you could take nothing. The title and estates only descended in the male line, and he should leave all his personal property to his widow."

It was a cruel fraud. The angry noble had taken advantage of the artist's dreamy-unbusiness-like nature to deceive him.

Belle guessed her grandfather had repented in his last hours and had resolved to give his grandchild the rights her father could not claim for her, but his wife prevented his intentions being fulfilled.

Why Belle, and not Geoffrey, was the owner of Ardley Court and its ten thousand a year. For the last seven years that vast income had been hers and hers only.

That last thought comforted her. Had her father—had the children had any right to share the Danver property, for their sakes, perhaps, it would have been wrong to keep silence. Now she could keep her secret to the end. She was wronging no one but herself, and it would have broken her heart to have grown rich by Geoffrey's ruin.

"Lady Danver told me I was like Lady Isobel, papa. I think I'm glad I've seen my mother's home just once."

"Then you are not going back, Belle? I feel sure you are keeping something back. Tell me, child, were they unkind to you?"

"They were as kind as they could be, but—Lord Danver asked me to be his wife, and so you see I can never go back to Ardley Court."

"Poor Dick! He little guesses what a rival he has had," said Mr. Forest. "Now, Belle, I think I understand; you want your mother and the children to believe you have been at Thornton Heath all this time?"

"Yes. Oh, father, you must manage it for me. I couldn't bear mother's questions."

It dawned on the unsuccessful man slowly that Ardley Court had been dear to Belle; he was not very quick at putting things together, but he did guess from her manner that but for Dick Fraser his child's answer to Lord Danver would have been different, and he was ready to shield her as far as possible from his wife's comments.

"Your mother has heard from Mrs. Fraser," he said, after a long pause.

"She wants you to go down to Devonshire and stay with her a bit. She says Dick will be home early in the spring, and she would like you to keep her company till then."

Belle looked at him wistfully.

"I should like to go. I don't feel brave enough to go among strangers. I feel afraid of trying to find another situation just yet, and I was always very fond of Mrs. Fraser. I will go to her very soon, if mother consents."

Mrs. Forest received Belle very kindly; the girl's forethought in spending

Christmas among strangers rather than adding to the home expenses had touched her heart. It was just the sort of thing she could appreciate. She declared Mrs. Tempest must have been a hard task mistress, for she had fretted the very flesh off the girl's bones, while as to colour she had no more than a mealy potato.

Belle made Mrs. Forest accept one of Lady Danver's bank notes, and with the other she replenished her simple wardrobe, keeping out enough money for her journey to Devonshire, and then early in February she set out for Mrs. Fraser's, feeling that it was the first step on the journey that would end with her wedding day.

She meant to tell Dick everything; she could not bear to write the story, but when he came home, and they were face to face, she would tell him the whole truth. He should not marry her under false pretences, that she was resolved.

In one respect Isobel Forest differed from most girls: she was warmly attached to her *fiancé's* relations. For a number of years the unsuccessful artist had lived near the Frasers, and his eldest child had spent a great deal of her time with them. The doctor and his wife had no daughter, and in that household of six boys little Belle had reigned as a queen.

Perhaps Belle's stepmother had yielded to the intimacy, foreseeing that it would provide the girl with a husband, but the artist himself liked the Frasers for their own sakes. He could never forget that they had been kind to his girl-wife in her last illness, and that to the doctor's wife's motherly care his Isobel's infant owed her life.

Ever since she could remember anything Belle had been at home at Dr. Fraser's; both he and his wife had been well pleased she should be Dick's wife. Though—as she told her husband—Dick was the dullest of her boys, his heart was made of gold, and Belle, who was a veritable sunbeam, would brighten him up.

"I hope you're right, wife," the doctor would say thoughtfully, "but I'd rather a wife should look up. Now, little Belle is the cleverest girl I ever met, and Dick, poor fellow, seems dull and countrified beside her, but if they're happy I am satisfied."

It was hardly fair to think—as Lord Danver did—that Dick had exiled himself for the sake of Isobel Forest. From earliest boyhood he had been meant for the Colonies. He had not the brains, his father said, to study for a profession, and he was too fond of outdoor pursuits to stand the confinement of trade. The original plan had been for him to join his uncle on an ostrich farm, but when he reached Africa the mania for speculation had seized on this relative, who had sold his farm and gone to the diamond fields. There Dick followed him, investing his small capital in a "claim," and then after eighteen months of failure most wonderful good fortune had befallen him, so that he was returning home with ten thousand pounds.

Doctor and Mrs. Fraser received their son's *fiancée* very kindly, and there in the beautiful Devonshire scenery Belle gradually regained, not perhaps the buoyant spirits of three months ago, but a certain grave cheerfulness which sat very prettily on the girl's face.

"I told you so," Mrs. Fraser could not resist saying to her husband; "the child is ever so much more thoughtful and more womanly since she heard of Dick's coming home, and it's my belief she's counting the days till he lands."

But Dr. Fraser saw far deeper than his wife, and on one of the fine March days when the air was so soft and balmy as to suggest that spring had really come at last, he invited Belle to accompany him on a seven miles' drive to see a distant patient. The gig only held two, but the quiet old horse knew his master's profession well, and was used to standing outside houses, so there was no fear of his becoming restive in Belle's hands.

The doctor was very silent until they had gone the first mile, and had left the streets and houses behind them; then he asked suddenly, "Belle, have you ever heard anything about your mother?"

The girl started and blushed crimson.

"I know that she was very beautiful, and that she died when I was born."

"She spent the last months of her life at Elmleigh," said the doctor. "Mrs. Fraser and I saw her constantly. I think we were her greatest friends. She was very beautiful, as you say, and though she had given up her home and family for your father's sake, she was intensely happy. I have known many happy marriages, Belle, my own among them, but I never saw such love as Mrs. Forest bore your father."

Mrs. Forest! Then Lady Isobel had dropped her title on her marriage. Belle looked at her old friend a little puzzled.

"Dr. Fraser, why do you tell me this?"

"Because, my dear, you are so like your mother in character and disposition, in face and temperament. It seems well nigh impossible you should not also have inherited her great capacity for loving. Belle, I speak to you because I am your friend, not because I am Dick's father. Do you love my son as you have it in you to love?"

There was a dead silence, then Belle looked up gravely.

"I told him I did not feel as he did, Dr. Fraser, and he was quite satisfied."

"My dear! It is of yourself I want you to think. Will the affection you have for Dick last to your life's end? It may be sixty years. Is it strong enough to help you to put up with his dullness—he is dull, poor fellow—and not to make you, as the years roll on, long for a companion who could appreciate your talents and intellect?"

Belle looked at the doctor gravely.

"Do you mean you think I shall meet someone I could have cared for—too late?"

"Just that, child."

"Then you need not mind, I have met him, and we could not be more divided than if I had been Dick's wife then."

"And you are sure nothing could put things right?"

"Quite sure. I mean to tell Dick, I would not deceive him for the world."

There was a strange mist before the doctor's eyes as he answered,—

"Ah, my dear, love's a wonderful thing, but it is rare for it to run smoothly in this life, and there's been a look on your face lately which I've not liked to see. I fancied maybe you'd found out you'd made a mistake, and would not say so for Dick's sake. You'll forgive his old father, Belle, for trying to put things right?"

CHAPTER IX.

THE *Indian* was expected at Southampton, and Dr. Fraser was going to meet his son; the mother had rather wished to include herself and Belle in the expedition, but her husband quietly prevented her desire, saying they had far better stay at home and prepare the fatted calf for the prodigal. Of course, Mrs. Fraser denied that Dick was a prodigal, but Belle persuaded her it would be much pleasanter to meet him in the dear old house than on board a ship with heaps of strangers looking on; both Mrs. Fraser and the Doctor were thankful afterwards that Belle had her way.

Dr. Fraser slept at the Railway Hotel at Southampton so as to be able to go out to the *Indian* in the first launch which started. As he finished breakfast the summons came, and he went on board the launch, looking as happily expectant as any father would who was about to meet a son who had never given him a day's anxiety in his life, and had been away more than two years.

As they neared the vessel the Doctor put up his eye-glass and scanned in vain the faces of the passengers on deck, but he saw no glimpse of Dick. When he climbed the gangway and stepped on board, a group of passengers were gathered close to him, but one look showed him Dick was not one of them. With a vague feeling of uneasiness he asked an officer whether Mr. Richard Fraser was on board.

"I'll speak to the Captain," replied the officer. "What name, sir?"

"Dr. Fraser; but I have no wish to trouble the Captain. If you'll just tell my son I'm waiting for him."

But another officer came up and led the way to the Captain's cabin, and there the commander of the ship got through his painful task. Dick Fraser had sailed in the *Indian*, but passing through the tropics he was struck by sunstroke and death was almost instantaneous.

The Doctor staggered to his feet and then sat down again, and gave one long questioning look at the vast blue water.

"It had to be," said the Captain, answering the silent inquiry. "We had a clergyman aboard, and he read the service over him."

"Thank Heaven his mother did not come with me," said the Doctor brokenly, "and the poor girl who was to have been his wife."

Captain Gunn said all he could to console the bereaved father, telling him that Dick had been the favourite of all the passengers; so cheerful and good natured, so ready to do a kind turn for every one.

"But," said the Captain, "one thing struck me: through all his good spirits there ran a vein of sadness, and talking to me one day he said he had long had a fixed conviction he should never reach England alive. So firmly had this presentiment taken hold of him, he said, he made his will before he left Africa. I have no doubt you will find it among his things. I would have telegraphed to you from Madeira, but one can say very little in an ocean cablegram, and as all was over, it seemed to me kinder to leave you in ignorance four days longer, than to send you the bare fact without a word of explanation."

Dr. Fraser never knew how he got home with his miserable news; his other sons were all away, the two elder launched in life, the three younger at school. There were only Belle and his wife in the dear, shabby old drawing-room when he entered, having gone into the house by the surgery door, so that his knock should not bring them into the hall in haste to welcome him and Dick.

Mrs. Fraser fainted at the terrible news. Dick had been her favourite son, and she had a long and serious illness on hearing of his death. Belle nursed her through it as devotedly as though she had been her own daughter, and the June sunshine had come before any one in the Doctor's household was able to trouble about the future, or face the inevitable business conversation which follows a death.

Dick's will was a very short one and as simple as the poor fellow himself. He left the ten thousand pounds, which had been already forwarded to England, equally between his father and Belle. He left his mother everything else he had, which included his little personal possessions, and one or two uncut diamonds. He begged his people to be good to Belle, and that she would think of him sometimes for the sake of the love he bore her.

Dr. and Mrs. Fraser would gladly have kept the girl their boy had loved to be their adopted daughter, but things were going very badly in Elizabeth-street, and they felt Belle was right in deciding her place was at home.

"You must come and see us very often," said the Doctor kindly; "and, child, remember I am your trustee, you are a moneyed lady now, Belle. My poor boy's legacy brings you in about two hundred a year, so you are not to kill yourself teaching any longer."

"Dr. Fraser," said Belle simply, "I ought not to take that legacy. I have no right to it."

"You have every right, dear. You are the woman Dick loved. It was the thought of winning you gave him the hope and energy to make that fortune, and I am quite sure—could he know, poor fellow—he would be terribly grieved at your refusing it. My wife agrees with me, Belle; not only is the money yours legally, but we are both glad that you should have it."

Two hundred a year seems a very different sum, according to the people who are considering it. To Lord Danver it would have meant the merest trifle. To Mrs. Forest, striving to bring up eight children on no income at all, it seemed a veritable fortune.

"Of course, it's all yours," she said, a little grudgingly to Belle, "but you can never spend the half of it."

"I don't mean to try," said Belle, quietly. "When Dr. Fraser sends the cheque each half year I mean to keep twenty pounds for myself, and give you the other eighty. You will make it go much farther than I could."

"Do you mean it, Belle?"—the poor woman's voice was almost plaintive in its anxiety—"do you mean that I may count on a hundred and sixty pounds a year?"

"Yes," said Belle cheerfully, "except that you will have to keep me out of it. The Frasers would not like my taking another situation, and—I would rather stay at home."

"And I'm glad enough to have you," said the much-harassed Mrs. Forest. "I'd never have let you go away at all, only things were so bad. You always had a wonderful way with children, Belle, and your father thinks there's no one like you."

So the summer faded into autumn, and autumn gave place to winter, and the season of the year Belle dreaded was approaching fast. How she hated the thought of Christmas no tongue can tell. From Christmas-eve till the middle of January every day would hold some painful memory for her, not a doubt but that she would feel "December's darkness" in every fibre of her heart; but Christmas morn would bring her no light or rejoicing. Indeed, it seemed to Belle sometimes the very power of rejoicing was dead within her, and that nothing in the world had the power to wake it into life.

Of Ardley Court and its inhabitants she had heard nothing since last January; there might have been no such place, no such people, for all she had heard of their doings, since Lord and Lady Danver led too retired a life for their doings to be chronicled in society journals (though Belle had waded through dozens of them in the hopes of finding some mention of Geoffrey), and she knew no one living anywhere near Ardley. The Tilts had been very kind to her, but she could not correspond with them since they had known her as Miss Cleaver.

For one thing Belle was thankful. Lady Danver had never heard her mention the name of Forest—a name, the girl felt very sure, full of bitter associations for the Countess.

As the time wore on, and the shock of Dick Fraser's death became a thing of the past, Mrs. Forest began to wonder at the change in Belle.

"You've never been the same," she said one day, "since you went to Mrs. Tempest's last Christmas. It's just as though you've been fretting over something ever since. It's hard enough for you to have lost Dick so near your wedding and all. But you are not twenty. It's folly to spend your whole life in mourning a man you've not seen since you were a child of sixteen. You're getting thin and pale, Belle; you really must try to rouse yourself."

Belle promised that she would. She even invested in a bottle of tonic, and took the children to the Crystal Palace by way of relaxation, but she was still very pale and thin, and Christmas drew every day nearer.

It wanted just a week to the great festival, when coming home from a long shopping expedition with Mrs. Forest Belle found a letter waiting for her with the Ardley post-mark, and addressed in the clear, large hand she had known so well when she used to see Lord Danver's writing continually at the Court. The very sight of it brought a rush of joy to Belle's heart. He had written to her, therefore he must have forgiven her. It never came into the girl's head to remember that as Geoffrey believed her to be Belle Cleaver he would hardly write to her as Miss Isobel Forest. She crept away to her own room with the precious letter in her hand, regardless of the children's voices calling to her to show them her purchases, and her stepmother's entreaties that she "would sit down there and then and drink her tea, for she looked quite faint-like."

CHAPTER X.

LORD DANVER had missed Belle to the full as much as she had missed him. But there was this difference in their regrets: Belle's had nothing of anger in them; even while she sorrowed over the harshness that had made Geoffrey refuse to pardon her breach of faith to Dick Fraser and deliberately put her out of his life, she could yet admire the stern, rugged honour which had driven him to it. Looking at things quietly in the light of after days, Belle knew perfectly that to have been Geoffrey's wife and felt he doubted her would have indeed been one long torture.

But Lord Danver from the moment he left Belle regretted his decision. He was hurt, angry and wounded, but when the force of his first resentment had spent itself, a strange instinct told him he would have been happier had he at least given the pardon she besought so piteously, had he at least parted from her with a kindly farewell.

As the weeks and months wore on Lord Danver found that, erring and faulty though Belle had been, he loved her just the same, and there were times even when he would gladly have taken her back to his heart and showered his love on her again. But these were moments of weakness, to be despised when his will was firmer.

"Bah!" he said to himself bitterly one day, "she's married to the African emigrant by this time. She wouldn't be likely to tell him about me in spite of all she said, and even if she did from the letter I read he was infuriated enough with her to forgive anything."

Lord Danver tried to persuade his mother to have another companion, but she resolutely declined.

"There is a spell against me, Geoff," she said, sadly. "I have had four since July, and the only one of them I took to persisted in leaving at the end of her first month. I should never like anyone after Miss Cleaver, so I will keep as I am."

Which meant that whenever the Earl was out Mrs. Warren and her daughters haunted the Court, and that every penny of Lady Danver's jointure went into their rapacious clutches. The Countess was as poor herself as though the ruin she had prophesied so long had really come. She bought herself only the most absolute necessities, and these she caused to be entered in her son's name. Geoffrey paid the bills without a murmur; to do him justice he grudged his mother nothing; he had almost given up trying to get rid of the Warrens; indeed, his grief for Belle so occupied his mind that it had almost driven out the other care.

He went abroad for three months in the summer, and remained away until December. Mrs. Warren held high revels in his absence; perhaps this made her reckless, for when Geoffrey returned he found her one autumn afternoon composedly unlocking one of the drawers of his writing-table with a skeleton key. The Earl's face went white with rage, he locked the study door, and then turned to confront the delinquent.

"I shall send for the police and give you into custody on the charge of attempting to commit a felony unless you answer me a few questions," he said, coolly.

"You daren't," was the woman's rejoinder; "as one of the family the shame would fall on you."

"Not at all. Every one in this neighbourhood knows I have forbidden you my house. I have caught you, so to say, in the act, and your punishment would be a heavy one."

"Then I shall reveal what I know about your mother. I believe the sentence for her crime would be penal servitude."

"I don't believe it. But in any case, Mrs. Warren, your tyranny has lasted long enough, and at any cost my mother shall be free from your sway. Take your choice. Either reveal the nature of your power over her, or I send for the police. I can give you ten minutes for consideration."

Like all bullies, Mrs. Warren was a coward. In less than five minutes she gave in.

"I will tell you everything. I shall enjoy seeing your pride taken down a peg or two. You have no more right to Ardley Court than I have, and but for your mother's felony you would never have been master here. On his deathbed your stepfather confessed that his daughter Isobel married a year before her death, and left a child who, though she could not inherit the title, could strip you of everything else. Lord Danver did not trust to his wife's memory, perhaps he thought it would be treacherous; he drew up a short will formally naming his grandchild as his heiress, and giving her name and the address where he had last heard of her. She could never claim her rights, he said, as her father believed the Danver entail excluded females."

"Thank heaven!"

"Have you gone mad?" asked Mrs. Warren. "Don't you know that this will strips you of everything—of lands and wealth. You will have nothing in the world but what your own father left you, and if Miss Forest chooses she can make you refund every penny of the back rents for the last seven years."

"Where is the will?" demanded Geoffrey. "Don't say that you have destroyed it."

"It is in your mother's custody. She did not mind robbing her husband's grandchild, but she could not bring herself to burn his will, Geoffrey," and Mrs. Warren's voice changed. "Be reasonable, marry one of my girls, and I swear to you I will never reveal the fraud to any living creature."

The Earl turned from her in loathing.

"I have robbed my cousin unwittingly for seven years, but she shall not be kept out of her inheritance a day longer than I can help. I will wish you good morning, Mrs. Warren, for once in your life you have done me a service."

He went straight to his mother. He uttered no reproaches. Very tenderly he told her he knew the truth, and asked her to give him her husband's will.

"Then Jane has betrayed me at last!" moaned the Countess. "Oh, Geoffrey, if you knew how I tried all these long years to keep the secret."

"Only give me the will, mother," he said eagerly. "Don't tremble so. Mrs. Warren for her own sake will keep silence. I shall pretend we have suddenly found the will, and not even open it until Harcourt is here."

"Will they send me to prison, Geoff? Jane always said so."

"No, dear;" and his heart ached as he thought of all she had suffered from Mrs. Warren. "And we shall not be ruined either. I have never touched the property my father left me. It brings in some hundreds a year. Why, with your jointure we shall be quite rich. You must cheer up, mother dear. I tell you truly I am thankful I have discovered the truth at last."

Mr. Harcourt came down the next day, summoned by telegram, and Lord Danver placed the will in his hand, saying he had only just discovered its existence. As the lawyer was quite aware of the mysterious authority Mrs. Warren exercised over her sister, he probably guessed the whole story of the affair, but real sympathy for Geoffrey kept him silent about it, and he only said it was a most common thing for wills to be lost, and that he hoped the present would be a satisfactory testament. It was a far more favourable one than Geoffrey had expected. Lord Danver left everything he could alienate from the estate to his wife with succession to her son. He mentioned his grandchild as Isobel Forest, daughter of Walter Forest, artist, of 92, Elizabeth-street, Newington, and he specially directed that at his wife's death the family jewels should revert to her. Geoffrey and Mr. Harcourt were asked to act as her trustees, and the will ended with a request the younger Isobel would try to think kindly of her grandfather, in spite of his harshness to her mother.

"Seven years' back rents!" muttered the lawyer with a groan, "but I don't believe any court would give her authority to claim them, even if she were avaricious enough to wish for them. Lord Danver, for your sake, I am bitterly grieved to hear of this Miss Forest."

"And I am very glad to hear of her. Do you think it is nothing to have the Warrens discomfited, and to be free from them?"

"Did you take my former prescription, my lord?"

"I'm afraid I forgot even what it was."

"It was that you should marry."

"No, I did not take it—at least I'm not engaged."

"If only you would think seriously of it your cousin would be a most suitable match for you. Lady Isobel's daughter must be nearly twenty, and—"

"Mr. Harcourt, don't go matchmaking for me. My mother, poor soul, tried her best at it and failed. You may live to be a hundred, but you will never hear my wedding bells."

"What do you wish me to do? Shall I call on Miss Forest?"

"I think I will write to her myself. You see we have no idea what sort of a man her father is. I will write to her, telling her the simple facts, and saying you will call and explain things to her, or else receive her at your office. Of course we will give up possession at once. I own I shall be sorry to leave the Court. I should like to spend another Christmas here if it was possible."

"You mean to admit her identity then?"

"Well, if she still lives at the address given in the will I should say she must be Isobel Forest, but I leave the question of proofs to you."

And Geoffrey's letter to his unknown cousin was posted two days later. It was very short, merely saying that his stepfather's will had only just been discovered, and until it was read no one knew of the existence of Lady Isobel's daughter. Miss Forest was Lord Danver's sole heiress. His lawyer, Mr. Harcourt, would call on her, or would be happy to explain things to her at his own office in the Temple; and finally the letter concluded,

"Your kinsman, and, if you will suffer it, faithful friend,
DANVER."

"Dear me!" cried Mrs. Forest when Belle came down with sparkling eyes, "your letter has done you good, I can see."

But Belle said nothing about the letter or its contents. It was not the thought of the vast wealth which had come to her that had brought joy to her heart, it was the recollection of Geoffrey's words in that last sad interview. "If I lost my fortune, if I was poor and obscure, and you came back to me, then I might believe in you—never else."

Well, the impossible had come to pass.

Geoffrey had lost his fortune. Why should she not go back to him?

CHAPTER XL, AND LAST.

MR. HARCOURT was sitting in his private room one December morning when Miss Forest was announced, and he looked with much curiosity on the girl, who had so suddenly become an heiress. The scrutiny made him certain of one thing—in looks at least, she was worthy of the Danvers.

"I knew your mother well," he said, gently. "For her sake I hope to serve her daughter."

Belle looked at him with a grateful smile.

"I had Lord Danver's letter last night, and I came here before I told my father or anyone. Mr. Harcourt, need I take all this money? I have been poor all my life and a tenth of it would seem riches to me. Can't I take just a little for father and the children, and give back the rest to Lord Danver?"

"I fear not, my dear, though the thought does credit to your heart. There is one thing you might offer, if Lord Danver had to pay you the back rents for the last seven years it would well nigh ruin him; you might forego these arrears."

Belle opened her eyes.

"Of course!" she said eagerly. "You don't surely suppose I would take them?"

"Lord Danver and his mother would be glad to remain at the Court till about the middle of next month; but they will be ready to give up possession of it then, by which time I shall have found the necessary certificates proving your identity."

"I shall never take the Court; you need not look incredulous, sir, for I mean it."

"My dear young lady you are Quixotic. You must not rob yourself for the sake of a distant cousin."

"Do you know Lord Danver, Mr. Harcourt?"

"Very well—I may say intimately."

"And you knew my mother, too? For her sake and his, will you keep a secret if I tell it you?"

"I will keep it faithfully."

"For just one day I was Lord Danver's betrothed wife—now, don't you understand why I hate the thought of robbing him?"

"But—he says he has never seen you!"

"I was very poor and a friend got me the post of companion to Lady Danver. I went there in my friend's name—Cleaver. And Lord Danver never knew it was not my own!"

"And—forgive me—what parted you?"

"He thought I accepted him for his money. Mr. Harcourt, you can do one thing for me. Let it be published in some paper that Lord Danver has lost Ardley Court and his fortune; let it be in print so that any one can see it, and then—"

"And then?" repeated the lawyer.

"Oh, then I might go and condole with him."

A smile played round the lawyer's lips.

"I should say you had got your own way pretty thoroughly all your life, Miss Forest."

"Father spoils me," she answered. "Well, Mr. Harcourt, are you going to grant me my favour?"

Apparently he did grant it, for the next day a short paragraph appeared in most of the London papers, stating that the late Lord Danver had left a grandchild who was his lawful heiress, the present Earl would therefore lose all the Danver property, and probably be the poorest nobleman in the United Kingdom.

Miss Forest read the paragraph approvingly, and told her stepmother she was going out that morning to see a friend.

"Good gracious!" said Mrs. Forest. "Christmas-eve's a very bad day for visiting, Belle. You'll find your friend up to her eyes in work. Who is it?"

"Someone I met last Christmas," was the reply, and as Belle's income had made her a very important person in Mrs. Forest's eyes, no further explanation was required.

Miss Belle had not forgotten the dearth of flies at Ardley Station last year, and she quietly telegraphed to the stationmaster to have one to meet the four o'clock train. She had a vague idea if her mission at the Court failed she would take refuge at the Rectory if there was no train back to London that night, but she would not think of failure.

She stopped the fly at the lodge gates and walked up the avenue alone. Her heart beat so fast she could hardly speak when Hicks opened the door.

"Is Lady Danver at home?"

The man started; he recognised the young lady at once.

"No, Miss Cleaver, she has driven down to the Rectory; but she will not be long if you can come in and wait for her. The Earl is in the library."

Hicks, of course, remembered his master had never objected to *tête-à-tête*s with Miss Cleaver. He had not a suspicion of doing anything calculated to surprise the Earl when he flung open the library door and announced the visitor. Then he closed it and retreated to tell his wife of her favourite's arrival.

"Geoffrey!"

"Belle!"

The word seemed wrung from him in surprise. Then he recollected himself and inquired gravely,—

"To what do I owe this honour, Mrs. Fraser?"

"Hush! you must not call me that."

"Do you mean—" Geoff hesitated, "that he was angry about—last January."

"He never knew—he died on the voyage home. I meant to tell him the truth when I saw him. I'm glad now I didn't write it—I like to think he died believing in me."

"What have you come here for?" asked Geoffrey, gruffly. "That is what I want to know."

"I am so tired—won't you ask me to sit down?"

He drew a chair close to the blazing fire.

"Forgive me—and now."

She raised her sweet eyes to his face.

"Last January you told me if you lost your fortune, and I came back to you then—you would believe in me. Geoff, my love, my darling, I have come."

Her voice died away, the smile faded from her lips, but Lord Danver's heart was melted, he opened his arms and gathered her to his heart.

"I tried hard to forget you, Belle, but I could not do it. Little girl, I have lost lands and wealth, but I count myself a rich man to-night since my love has come back."

"And you will believe in me always?"

"Always, sweetheart, but," with a comical smile, "how about your old dread of poverty? Don't you remember how you used to think being poor the greatest misfortune in the world?"

"But I know better now. This last year has taught me there are worse sorrows in the world than being poor, Lord Danver," and it was Belle's turn to smile now. "How is Mrs. Warren?"

The Earl laughed heartily.

"She and her two daughters departed last week, bag and baggage, and the

cottage is shut up. My unknown kinswoman will probably never see a penny of her rent, but it is a very trifling sum, so I don't suppose she will trouble herself."

"And Lady Danver?"

"My mother looks ten years younger since we discovered the truth. I think she had foretold my ruin so long that when it came it was a positive relief to her to find it so easy to bear."

"Don't you mind, really?"

"Not half so much as I expected. You see," and he smiled, "my tastes are not extravagant; my mother retains the use of the Dower House, and between us we make up an income sufficient to keep us as gentlefolks. Miss Forest magnanimously foregoes the back rents, so the future is easy."

"Have you seen her?"

"No; but when she is settled here we mean to come over and make her acquaintance. I had rather dreaded this dear old place passing to a stranger, but Harcourt, my lawyer, tells me Isobel Forest is her mother's image in face and that he thinks she will make no unworthy mistress of the Court. And now, Belle, have you sprung from the clouds? Will you stay and spend Christmas with us, or shall I take you home and ask Mr. Cleaver the question I was to have asked last January?"

"Mr. Cleaver has nothing to do with me," returned Belle, demurely. "The fact is, Geoffrey, I never saw him in my life."

The Earl stared, he really could not help it, and Belle explained.

"His daughter had accepted Lady Danver's situation, but she never meant to come here. She had a lover who wanted her to marry him at once. She was going to telegraph an excuse to your mother when she met me. I wanted a situation very badly, and so—"

"And so she sent you in her stead?" said Geoffrey, "I see it all."

"If I had stayed I meant to tell Lady Danver, but when you were so angry and I thought I should never see any of you again, it did not seem to matter by what name you remembered me."

She smiled.

"Well, it doesn't matter very much what your name is now, as you will so soon change it for mine, but in the meanwhile I should like to know of whom I am to ask for this little hand."

"My father's name is Forest," said Belle, gravely, "and I was christened Isobel after my mother."

Lord Danver looked bewildered.

"Do you mean it?"

"I do. You are far more difficult to convince of my identity than Mr. Harcourt was."

"I am only overwhelmed," he said, gravely, almost sadly, "when I think of how I doubted you. Pray, when did you know this?"

"The day I left the Court. When my father heard where I had been he told me it was my mother's old home."

"I wonder he never claimed your rights."

"He had no idea of them, Geoffrey. Will your mother be very angry?"

"She will be delighted. Now, Belle, I am going to telegraph to Mr. Forest that you are here in safe keeping. I can't let you go till after Christmas. Luggage! Indeed, what nonsense, you must do without. My mother can lend you anything you want."

"Are the carol singers coming?" enquired Belle.

"Yes, we thought we would have them for the last time. My mother is going to bring back the Tilts to dinner."

And when the village choir tramped into the hall before they began their songs, Lord Danver presented to them his future wife, the new mistress of the Court, and a cheer both loud and deep rent the air, that the Earl was not to leave the home he loved so well.

And then, led by Rufus Green, the carols started, and the first one, by Belle's request, was her favourite—

"The blasts of chill December sound,
The farewell of the year,"

and as the last note died away she turned to her lover and whispered,—
"It is just as though it had been written for us, Geoffrey, for to us indeed has

"December darkness brought again,
The Light of Christmas Morn,"

and as Lord Danver pressed the little hand he held a great thankfulness filled his heart for the happiness given back to him so strangely on Christmas-Eve.

